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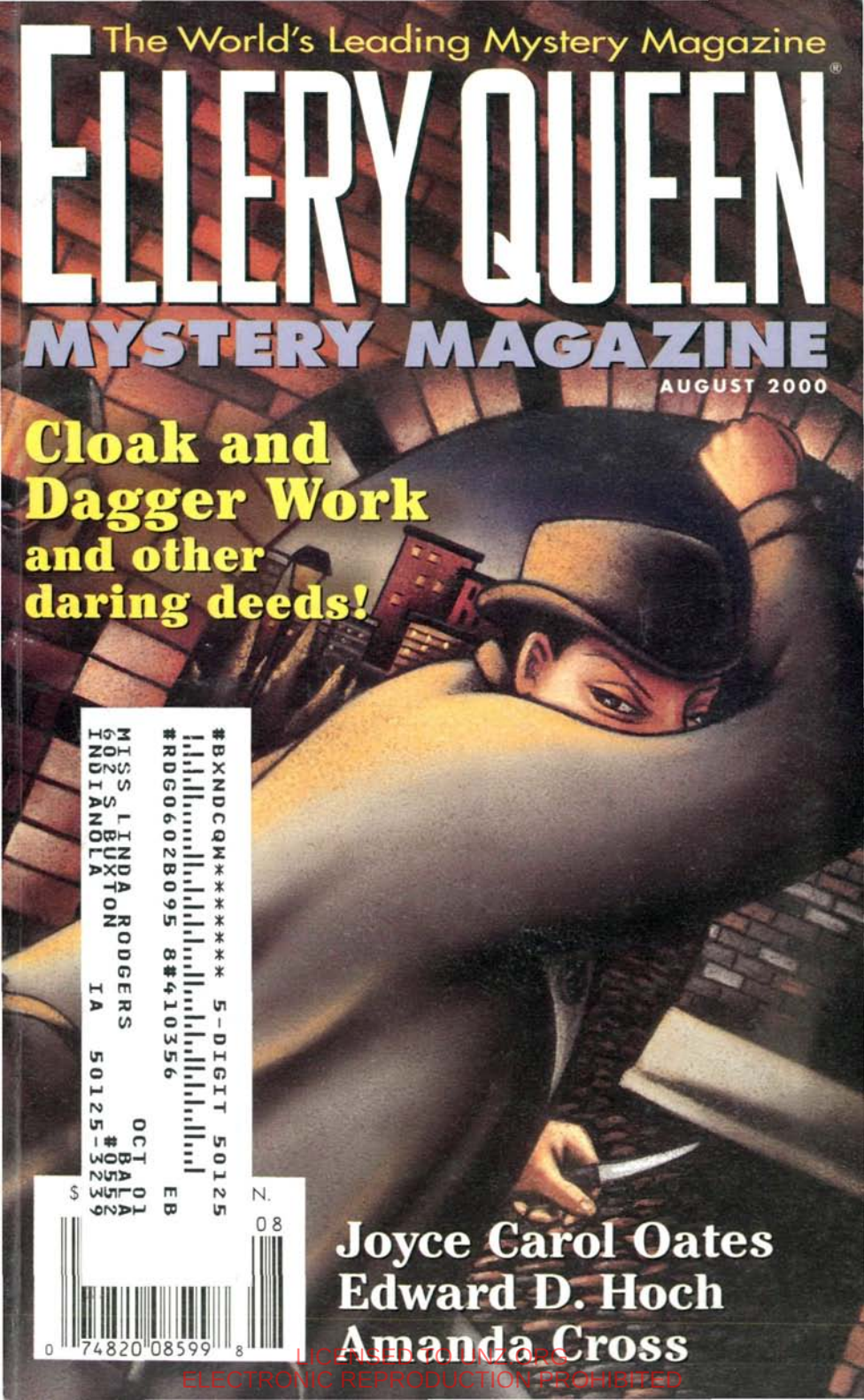

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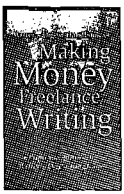

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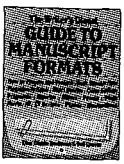

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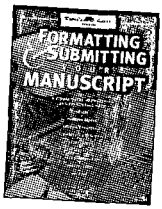

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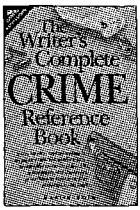

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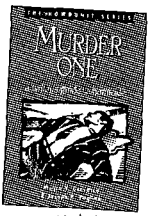

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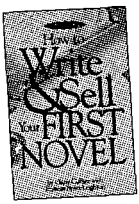

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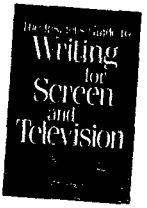

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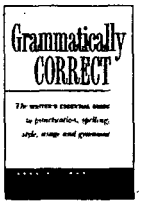

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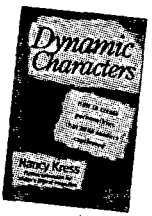

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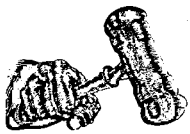

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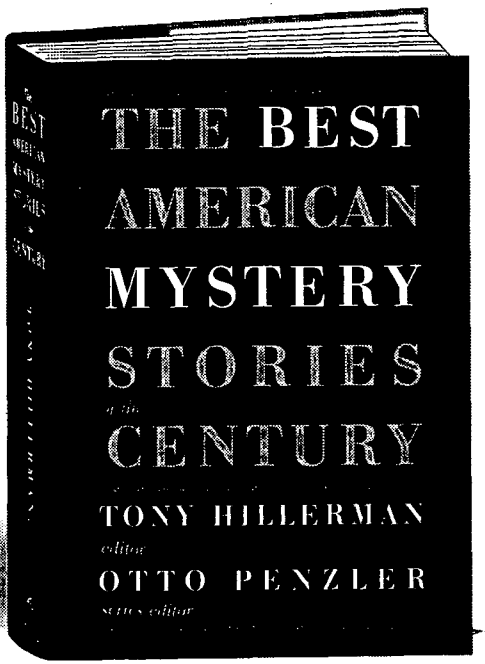
Tony Hillerman tracks down...



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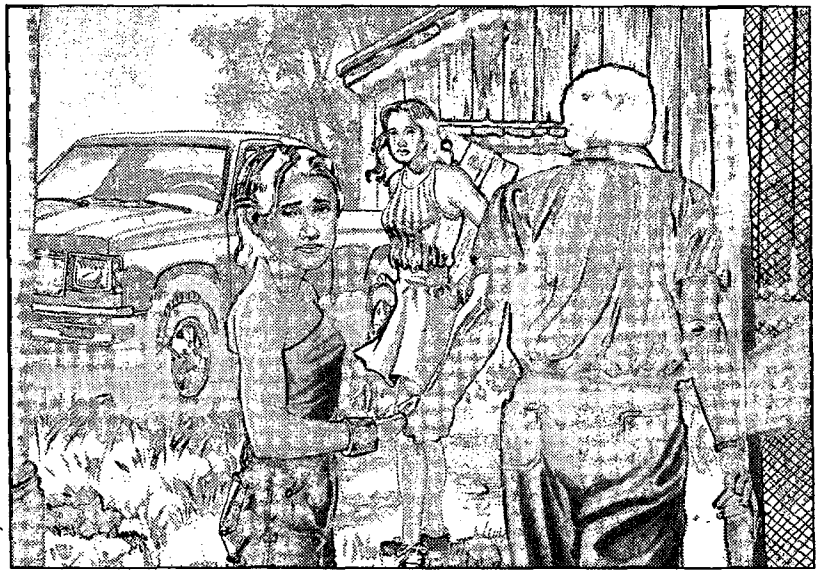

Art by Mark Evans

HAPPINESS

by Joyce Carol Oates

On the harsh sunlight on the pebbly southern shore of Lake Ontario. All objects are sharp and clear as if drawn with a child's crayon. Colors are bright, bold, unambiguous. Always there's wind. No shadows. Maybe the wind blows shadows away?

This story is written with a child's crayon. Matte black, or purple, with a faint oily sheen. Crayolas like the kind we played with when we were small children.

What did you see that day?

Kathlee. What did I see that day, I saw nothing. I saw the sharp edges of things. I heard a dog snarling and whining but I saw no dog. I was headed into the house because I was looking for Irish. He wasn't my fiancé then. He was not. Somehow I was in the house. And passing through the kitchen, and saying *Irish? Where are you, Irish?* because maybe it was a game, Irish was a boy for games, you couldn't look at him for more than a minute before he'd get you to smile, and there came Irish stepping out of nowhere,

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behind me I guess, in the hall, and catching my arm, my bare forearm, between two of his big callused fingers, and I stopped right there on my toes on the threshold of that room (did I smell it, yes I guess: the blood: a rich dark-sickish smell, and the buzzing! yes I guess it must've been flies, on the McEwan farm there were horse flies big as your thumb) like a dancer, and his arm around my waist quick to turn me toward him, and he said *Kathlee, no you don't want to see* and right there I shut my eyes like a scared little girl, pressed against his chest, and he held me, oh I felt his heart beating hard and steady but what did I see that day at the McEwan farm, I saw nothing.

A recent *PW* review of Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Blonde* observed: "Oates . . . has an impressive ability to empathize with people in the underclass . . . " That may be because, as Ms. Oates says in an accompanying interview, "I'm from a working-class background . . . If you're poor, you don't have many options; life comes flying at you." Her new story for *EQMM* is peopled with characters for whom that is a harrowing truth. †

Irish McEwan was my first love, and my only. I would believe his innocence all my life. I was sixteen, that day at the farm.

Nedra. What did I see that day, *I don't know!* It was the start of my nervousness. My bad eyes. Even now I hate a surprise. If I'm back from school and it's winter and dark and nobody's home I'm half scared to go inside. After that day at the McEwan farm, I couldn't sleep a night through for years. And if Red, our border collie, began barking it's like *I might jump out of my skin!* People joke about things like that but what's funny? I'd go upstairs in our house and if it was dark, somebody'd have to come with me. For a long time. Almost, I couldn't use the bathroom during the night. Couldn't sleep, thinking of what I'd seen. No, not thinking: these flashes coming at me, like a roller-coaster ride. And Kathlee across the room sleeping. Or pretending to sleep. *Kathlee didn't see, she has sworn that on the Holy Bible. Her testimony at the courthouse. Her affidavit.*

These are words not a one of us knew before. Now we say them easy as TV people.

Kathlee. What did I see that day, I saw nothing. Swore to the police and then to the court ALL I KNEW EXACTLY AS I RECALLED IT. Placed my hand on the Holy Bible so help me God. I had prayed for help and guidance in remembering but

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when I tried there was a buzzing in my head, a fiery light like camera flashes.

Kathlee, no you don't want to see. C'mon!

Even now, it's years later. I will get sick if I try.

No, Holly will *not be told.* If I learn of anyone telling her, I will be madder than hell! That's a warning.

Nedra. What did I see, Oh God: I looked right into the room. I ran to the doorway, couldn't have been stopped if even Irish had grabbed me, which he did not, hadn't seen me I guess where I'd been sort of hiding behind the refrigerator. Half-scared but giggling, like this was a game? Hide-and-seek.

I'm like that. I mean, I was. A tomboy. Pushy.

At school I always had to be first in line. Or raising my hand to answer the teacher. I was quick, and smart. It wasn't meant to be selfish—well, maybe it was, but not only that—but like I was restless, jumpy. Mexican jumping bean, Grandma called me. Like a watch wound so tight it's got to tick faster than any other watch or it will burst.

How long we were driving the back-country roads, I don't know. Started out in Sanborn, around 2 P.M., I mean Irish and Kathlee picked me up then. We drove to Olcott Beach, then the Lake Isle Inn where Irish was drinking beer and Kathlee and me Cokes, and we played the pinball machines and Irish played euchre with some older men and it happened he won fifty-seven dollars. The look on his face! Kathlee and I counted it out in mostly ones and fives. Irish kept saying he wasn't any card player, must've been luck like being struck by lightning.

Kathlee said then we'd better go home, Nedra and her. And Irish right away agreed. We'd been with him all that afternoon. And I was worried that Grandma might've called home to tell Momma—or what if Daddy answered the phone!—how we'd gone off with somebody in a pickup truck she hadn't caught a clear glimpse of (from the front window where she was looking out) but believed it was an older boy, not Kathlee's age. And that swath of dark-red hair, maybe one of the McEwans? (The McEwans were well known in the area. Mostly, the men had bad reputations. Not Irish McEwan, everybody liked Irish who'd played football at Strykersville High, but the others, especially the old man Malachi.)

So Irish treats everybody at the Lake Isle Inn to drinks, roast beef sandwiches, and French fries. Spent more than half of his winnings like he needed to be rid of it.

When we left it was a little after 5 P.M. Though I could be wrong. It's summer, and bright and glaring-hot as noon. A kind of shimmery light over the lake, and a warm briny-smelling wind, and

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that smell of dead fish, clams. Irish is driving us home and there's a good happy feeling from him winning at euchre, he's saying maybe his luck has changed, and it's strange to me, to hear a boy like Irish McEwan say such a thing, like his life is not perfect though he is himself perfect (in the eyes of a thirteen-year-old, I mean). In the front seat Kathlee is next to Irish, squeezed between him and me, and her hair that's the color of ripe wheat is blowing wild. And her skirt lifting over her knees so she's trying to hold it down. And she's sneaking looks at Irish. And him at her. They'd danced a little at the tavern, dropping coins in the jukebox. And on the beach, I'd seen him kissing her. And I'm NOT JEALOUS, I'm only just thirteen and would be scared to death I KNOW if any boy let alone Irish McEwan asked to dance with me, or even talked to me in any special way. I'm this jumpy homely girl, immature my mother would say, for my age. Maybe I like Irish McEwan too, more than I should, but I know he'd never glance twice at me, and it's a surprise even he seems interested in Kathlee who's never had a boyfriend, she's so sweet and nervous and shy and flushes when boys talk to her, or tease her, though she can talk okay with girls, and adults, and gets B's in school. *Simple!* some of the kids say of my sister and that is absolutely untrue. Now Irish McEwan is asking politely where do we live, exactly?—he thinks he knows, but better be sure. And Kathlee tells him. And we're on the Strykersville Road, a two-lane blacktop highway leading away from Lake Ontario where the tavern is. It would be said of Irish McEwan that he'd had a dozen beers that afternoon, the alcohol count in his blood was high, but Irish never drove recklessly all the hours we were with him and has been polite not just to Kathlee and me, but to everybody we met. He's a muscle-shouldered boy you might compare to a steer on its hind legs. He's strong, and can be a little clumsy. He's got pale skin, for a boy who works outdoors, with smatterings of freckles, and thick dark-red hair straggling over his ears and down his neck. He would've been good-looking except for his habit of frowning, grimacing with his mouth, as bad as my father who's hard of hearing and screws up his face trying to figure out what people are saying. Irish McEwan is twenty-three years old and already his forehead's lined like a man's twice that age.

Then on the Strykersville Road, Irish says suddenly he has a feeling he'd better drop by his own house first. Because his father has been sort of expecting him and he hasn't gone. Because of meeting up with Kathlee, and then with me. And his father was expecting him around noon but he'd been with Kathlee then, and lost track of time. And Kathlee says okay, sure. So that's what we do. Where the McEwans live, or used to live, it's on the Strykersville Road about two miles closer to the lake than our house,

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and we live on a side road, so it makes sense to drop by Irish's house before he takes us home. The McEwan house (that would be shown in newspapers and on TV always looking better, more dignified than it is) is back from the highway about a quarter-mile. One of these bumpy rutted dirt lanes. Except the house is on a little rise, and evergreens in the front yard are mostly dead, you couldn't have seen it from the road. One of those old faded red-brick houses along Lake Ontario that look larger from the outside than they actually are, and sort of distinguished, like a house in town, except the shutters and trim are rotting, and the roof leaks, and the chimney, and there's no insulation, and the plumbing (as my father who's a carpenter would say) is probably shot to hell. And the outbuildings in worse shape, needing repair. The McEwans are farmers, or were, but hadn't much interest in farm work, at least not Malachi and Johnny who worked odd jobs in town, but never kept them long. These McEwans were men with quick tempers who didn't like to be bossed around, especially when they'd been drinking. So we're driving up the rutted lane and on one side is a scrubby cornfield and on the other is a rock-strewn pasture, and some grazing guernseys that raise their heads to look at us as Irish bounces past raising clouds of dust. *My pa is gonna be madder than hell* Irish says with this nervous laugh, *he wanted me here by noon.* Parking then in the cinder driveway. And there's an old Chevy sedan, and another pickup in the drive. And nobody around. Except scruffy chickens pecking in the dirt unperturbed, and a dog barking. This dog is a black mongrel-labrador cringing by the rear door of the house, and when Irish climbs out of the pickup the dog shies away, barking and whining, as if it doesn't recognize him. Irish calls to the dog *Mick, what's wrong? Don't you know me?* But the dog cringes and whimpers and runs away around the corner of the house.

And that's the first strange thing.

This gaunt ugly old faded red-brick house. Plastic strips still flapping over the windows, from last winter. Missing shingles, crooked shutters. The back porch practically rotted through. Streaks down the side of the house below the second-floor windows from, it would be said in disgust, men and boys urinating out the windows. *A house with no woman living in it you can tell.* (Because Irish's mother had died a few years ago, and the family split up. In the papers and on TV it would seem so confusing, who lived in this house, and who did not. Suspicious-sounding like the way they'd identify Irish as *Ciaran McEwan* which was a name nobody knew, and always giving his age as *twenty-three.* Strange and twisted such facts can seem.)

That day, August 11, 1969, only just the old man Malachi and the oldest brother Johnny were actually living in the house. But

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other McEwans, including Malachi's thirty-six-year-old biker son from his first marriage, might drop by at any time or even stay the night. And there might be a woman Malachi'd bring back from a tavern to stay a few days. At one time there'd been six children in the family, four brothers and two sisters, but all except Johnny had moved away. Irish moved away immediately after his mother died to live alone, aged seventeen, in Strykersville, in a room above the barbershop, and to work at the lumberyard where my dad knew him, and liked him. Most Saturdays in August, Irish had off. And so he happened to turn up in Sanborn, a small town six miles away, near the lake, where it just happened that Kathlee was working in our aunt Gloria's hair salon like she does some Saturdays, but not every Saturday, and I was at the library for a while, and then at our grandma's. *These things just happened, like dice being shaken and thrown, or like a pinball game, no more intention than that. I can swear!*

Irish enters his father's house by the rear door saying he'll be right back. The black Lab (that Irish would say he'd known since it was a pup) is hiding beneath the porch. Kathlee says, *Oh Nedra, d'you think Irish likes me?* She's excited, can't hardly sit still, licking her lips, peeping at herself in the dusty rearview mirror, and out of meanness I say guys like any girl who'll make out with them. Though I know it isn't true, an older guy like Irish would be used to kissing girls, and girls kissing him back, and plenty more beside that Kathlee, who's shocked by just words some of the boys at school yell, would never consent to. Kathlee says, *Nedra, you're not nice.* And I say, nudging her, in the waist where there's a pinch of baby fat Kathlee hates being teased over, *I guess you think you are? Kiss-kiss.* I'm puckering my lips making the ugliest face I can.

Kathlee says, *Sometimes I hate you.*

So Kathlee's fired up and huffy, and climbs out of the pickup, and goes to the screen door that's rusted and has a broken spring, swinging open from where Irish has gone inside. She's wearing that blue-striped halter-top sundress with the elastic waist and short skirt that makes her look like a doll, and her fluffy-wavy hair to her shoulders, and her cheeks sort of flushed and slapped-looking from the excitement. *Because Kathlee Hogan isn't the kind of nice girl you'd expect to be seen with a boy like Irish McEwan.* She's calling, *Irish? Irish?* in a breathy little voice nothing like you'd hear from her if it was just me, her sister, close by. And after a minute or so, she goes to look inside the screen door, saying, *Irish? Can I come in?* and I'm surprised, Kathlee opens the door and turns back to me and sticks out her tongue, and disappears inside like this is a house she's been inside before, and I know for sure *it is not.* And I jump down out of the pickup, too. And

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(not knowing how stupid this behavior is, as I'd realize later) I'm squatting by the porch trying to see the black dog that's hiding beneath it, that I can hear panting and growling, and I'm cooing *Mick! Good dog! Don't be afraid, it's just Nedra.*

Like I'm God's gift to animals. If Irish McEwan is going to be Kathlee's boyfriend, I'm not jealous for I can talk to animals, some animals at least. As I don't wish to talk to humans.

But the dog won't come to me, and I'm fed up and restless, and I follow Kathlee into the McEwan house, like this is a kind of thing I'm accustomed to doing. And stepping inside I feel shivery right away, and my heart starts kicking in my chest. That kitchen! A real old refrigerator, and a filthy gas stove, and a plastic-topped table covered with dirtied plates, and more dirtied plates in the sink, and grease-stained walls and a high ceiling that's all cobwebs and cracks. A sickish smell of old burnt food. And a darker smell like fermenting apples. And worse. And I'm wiping at my eyes, and almost can't see. You'd think I would be calling *Kathlee? Kathlee? Irish?* but it's like my tongue has gone numb. I'm wearing just a tank top and denim cutoffs and rubber-thong sandals from the discount bin at Woolworth's. Wet from Olcott Beach where we'd been running in the surf. And my straggly hair that's dishwater blond, not a soft pretty color like Kathlee's, sticking in my face. And there's Kathlee in the doorway, her back to me. She's looking into the front room (that would be called in the news stories the "parlor," not the living room) and it seems to me I can see her spine shivering, though she isn't moving just standing there, and what I'm seeing also that's unexpected is a grandfather clock in the hall, not ticking, pendulum still, a tall handsome wood-carved clock with Roman numerals and afterward I will learn that the clock belonged to Irish's mother, she'd brought it with her when she married Malachi McEwan. *Of course it's broken. Like everything in this house.* And there comes Irish up behind Kathlee. From a room off the hall. The bathroom, I'm thinking, because Irish is wiping his hands on his thighs like he's just washed them. Or maybe his hands are sweaty, he's sweated through his T-shirt. And there's this look on his face, hungry and scared, but when he touches my sister he's gentle, takes hold of her wrist between two of his big fingers, and Kathlee turns right away to look up at him, blank and trusting as a baby, or maybe she's stunned, in a state of shock, and Irish slips his arm around her waist, and says words I can't hear, and Kathlee presses against him and hides her face and when Irish turns to walk her away, back through the kitchen and out of the house, I hide from them in a corner of the kitchen, and they don't see me. And I'm excited, I know there's something in the front room *I have to see.* I can smell it, I'm so scared I'm shaking, or maybe it's just excite-

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ment, like our cats excited and yellow-eyed and their tails switching when they smell their prey invisible and indiscernible to us, and irresistible. I'm Nedra, the pushy one. I'm Nedra, all elbows. Lucky your sister came first, folks teased, 'cause your mother might not've wanted a second one of you. I'm Nedra, I would've pushed past Kathlee in the hall if Irish hadn't stepped out of that room. So I run to the doorway in a house strange to me, pushy and nosy. And I see. I'm panting like that dog under the porch, and I see. I don't know what I am seeing, what the name or names for it might be, this sight is no more real to me than flicking through TV like I do when I'm restless and nobody's there to scold me. Maybe I'm smiling. I'm a girl who smiles when she's nervous or scared, for instance if boys look at me in a certain way and I'm alone, and nobody close by to define me, to know not *who I am* (because I would not expect that) but *whose daughter*. My nostrils are pinching with the strong smell, and I'm beginning to gag. There's something sickish-rotten like guts, and human shit, a shameful smell you recognize without putting a name to it. And I hear the flies. And see them. Where they're a buzzing cloud like metal filings on the broken heads of two men. Men I don't know. Adult men, one of them with thick white bloodstained hair. Blood and brains on the filthy carpet of this room that would be called the parlor. Like a child had smeared crimson Crayola marks across a picture. Splashed onto a worn-out old sofa and chairs. The bodies looked like they'd crawled to where they were. Blood-soaked workclothes, and blood in the ridges and crevices of what had been faces. Yet they were lying easy as sleep. The weirdness was to me, seeing adult men lying on the floor, and me standing over them almost! Thinking, *Except for those horseflies they'd be at peace now.*

Kathlee. No, Irish McEwan was not my fiancé that day. Nor my boyfriend. All that, I explained.

I explained we'd been together every minute. Since late that morning around eleven, or eleven-thirty. To whenever time it was when the sheriff's men came, with their siren blasting, to the house. Irish was the one to telephone for help. He'd gone back inside the house, to use the phone. Yes: All those hours I was in his company. At first it was just Irish and me, then we went to pick up Nedra at Grandma's. Oh, all the places we drove, I don't know . . . We were talking and laughing. Listening to Tommy Lee Ryan, "Just Kiss Goodbye," and the Meadowlarks, "Sweet Lovin' Time." And the Top Ten.

A dozen times I would be questioned, and always I would swear. I began to get sick, fainting-sick, in just entering one of their buildings. My parents would take me of course. But you never get

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used to it. People looking at you like you're not telling the truth. Like you're a criminal or murderer yourself! *Don't be afraid of them, honey,* Irish would console me. *They can't do anything to you. They can't do anything to me either, I promise.* And I knew this was so, but I was filled with worry.

The last customer's hair I rinsed for my aunt Gloria was about ten o'clock, a walk-in. Then I did sweeping and cleanup and taking out trash et cetera into the alley. An hour of this, maybe. That's when I saw Irish McEwan driving past. On Niagara Street. Around eleven o'clock. A little later, I saw him parked by the bridge. Gloria said it was all right if I quit a little earlier, that time of summer is slow in the beauty salon. So I left around quarter to twelve, I'm sure. If Aunt Gloria remembers later, around one, oh she is mistaken but I never wanted to argue face-to-face. Always I was polite to older relatives, always to adults. You weren't rude, not in my family. I ran down the street to say hello to Irish McEwan who my father knew. Yes, that was the first time. Like that. Yes, but I knew him. From Strykersville. No, I never knew his father or brother. His father they called old man McEwan. (Not that Malachi McEwan was truly old: In the paper, his age was given as fifty-seven.)

Yes, Irish knew my name. He said it—*Kathlee.* It was my baby sister's name for me from when she couldn't pronounce *Kathleen.* So everybody called me *Kathlee,* that was my special name and I liked it.

We were talking and kidding around and Irish asked if I'd like to ride a little and I said yes, so we did, then he asked how'd I like to drive to Olcott Beach, which is nine miles away, and I said yes I would except we have to take my little sister Nedra, she's at our grandma's. So we went to pick up Nedra, where she was slouched on the glider on Grandma's porch reading. What time was this, maybe twelve-thirty. That Nedra! She was a fanatic about books. Every Saturday she'd return books to the library and take out more books and she had cards for two public libraries, and still that was hardly enough for her. She would go to college and be a librarian or a teacher everybody predicted. The first in the Hogan family to go away to school. I would have been the first to graduate from high school, except marrying Irish McEwan like I did in my junior year, I had to drop out. You couldn't be married at that time and remain in school. It just wasn't done. You'd be expelled. Nobody questioned this just as nobody questioned the Vietnam War. (Remember that war?) These days a girl can be pregnant and unmarried and she'll be welcome to stay in school, nobody protests. At least, not officially. It's an enlightened time today in this new century, or a fallen time. It's a more merciful time, as a Christian might see it, or it's a time of no shame. But then, in the

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early 1970s where we lived in Eden County in upstate New York, we were the people we were, and when Irish McEwan and I married I dropped out of school, and was happy to be a wife to him, and soon a mother. Good riddance was how I felt, leaving Strykersville, people talking about us like they were. Even so-called nice people. Even my friends. Because they were jealous. Because I was so happy, and had my baby thirteen months after we were married (I know, everybody was counting months), and nobody was going to cheat me of what I deserved. I swore on the Holy Bible that Irish McEwan had been in Sanborn by eleven o'clock that morning and he'd been in my company for hours and when we drove to his father's farm he was never out of my sight for more than a few seconds, and never until then saw what was inside the house. It was a pure shock to him. But his first thought was for me. *Kathlee,* he said, *no, you don't want to see.* He was white-faced and trembling but his first thought was of me. He pulled me from the doorway, and I didn't see. He said they'd been struck down by shotgun blasts, that was what it seemed to him. He was not excited or hysterical but calm-speaking, yet he was mistaken about this. Also, Irish said he knew who'd done it, but afterward he wouldn't repeat these words, he'd never repeat them again even to me, even after we were married. And moved away from Strykersville. And the farm (which was mostly mortgaged) was sold.

No. Nedra never went into that house. She was in Irish's pickup in the driveway. She was afraid to get out because of the dog barking. She says she followed me inside, and she saw the dead men, but that's just Nedra making things up. She was always nervous, and saw things in the dark.

Anything physical, that wasn't in a book, Nedra could not handle. For all her pushy behavior and sarcasm. Yes, she was smart, she got high grades, but there were things she didn't comprehend. She'd never have an actual boyfriend. The boys who might've liked her, she scared off with her smart-aleck remarks, and the other boys, they'd never give a plain skinny girl like Nedra a second glance. She was scornful of them too, or pretended to be. Saying to me, after Irish and I were married and living in Yewville, and Holly was about a year old, in this earnest quivering voice *Kathlee, how can you let it be done to you? What a man does? Doesn't it hurt? Or do you get used to it? And having a baby, doesn't it hurt awful?* I was so surprised at my sister saying such things, I laughed, but I was angry, too. I said *Nedra! Watch your mouth. This baby could pick up such talk, and remember years later.*

Nedra. And somebody comes up behind me to touch my shoulder. Where I'm just standing there. And it's Irish, and he's gentle with

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me like he'd been with Kathlee, saying my name, Nedra, which was strange on his lips, saying I'd better come outside with him, and not look anymore.

Like there's danger he must rescue me from. There *is* danger, and he will rescue me from it.

Not holding me as he'd held Kathlee. But he took my hand, that was numb as ice, like I'm a little girl to be led away. He brings me dazed and blinking and stumbling back outside where Kathlee is crying and whimpering, saying *Oh! oh! oh!* but I'm not crying, and I won't cry, it wasn't real to me yet. Or, I was thinking, *Who are they, nobody I know. Why should I cry.* But a hot acid mash comes boiling up out of me, my stomach, and I'm vomiting, spattering the ground at my feet and onto my yellow rubber-thong sandals from Woolworth's I would throw away forever, after that day.

I would not be a witness. I would not give a statement. I was thirteen years old and the county argued I was not a child, I was old enough to provide a statement they argued, but my parents told them yes I was too young, I was an immature girl for my age, and what I believed I might have seen wasn't necessarily to be believed. For Kathlee swore she'd seen nothing inside the house, and Kathlee insisted I had not even gone inside. *Because she was jealous. Irish McEwan leading me out of the house, holding my hand. That red-haired boy with the dark eyes, treating her sister tenderly.*

My eyes were never the same since. In the fall, I would be diagnosed as myopic in both eyes, and would have to wear glasses, and nobody can believe my eyes were perfect before what I was made to see, and my life changed. In a few years, I would "see" without glasses just vague blurry things, and partly this was my habit of reading, reading, reading all the time including late at night, with just a single lamp burning, but mostly it was because of what I saw at the McEwan farm that day, that my sister Kathlee would deny I ever saw! *Nedra you know you're imagining it. You never went anywhere near that house. Irish says he doesn't remember you inside. There was so much happening, and none of it had to do with you.*

I would wish to God I'd never gone to Sanborn that day. Or I would wish I'd stayed at Grandma's. I had my library books, and I was helping Grandma cut out a dress pattern in tissue paper, sticking in the straight pins, and holding it up against me. (A wool plaid jumper for me. That ever afterward, when I wore it, I would have a sickish feeling.) When Irish and Kathlee came by to get me, I would not know what time it was. It was after lunch, but how long, I don't know. They would inquire of Grandma, too, and she was confused and obstinate, and finally they gave up in disgust because if Grandma said one thing, next morning she would

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wish to change it, and finally they gave up on me. Because I could not contradict my sister who was so certain what she knew. I could not contradict my sister who swore what she believed to be true while in my state of nerves I could not swear what was true, nor even what I believed might be true. Was it past two o'clock they came for me, in the steel-colored Ford pickup with rusted grillwork, pulling up at the curb outside Grandma's house, or was it before noon, *I could not swear*. I would not say either time. For what a surprise to see my sister Kathlee with any boy, happy and waving at me, let alone that red-haired Irish McEwan everybody knew. When you're thirteen, being driven around in a twenty-three-year-old's pickup, and at Olcott Beach on the boardwalk and running along the beach laughing and squealing like girls you've seen all your life, with guys, but never dreamt it could be you, you are not able to retain a clear picture of what did, or did not, happen. Especially if it is hurtful of those close to you.

Nedra, you know. Just tell the truth.

It was before noon Irish came for me. It was only just a few minutes later, we came for you at Grandma's. You know!

He couldn't have been at the farm. When it happened. He was with me at the time they said it happened. Every minute, Irish was with me. Nedra, you know!

But I wish I didn't. Even now a long time later. Mr. McEwan and his son Johnny had been seen alive by a neighbor around noon of that day. The coroner ruled they'd been killed between that time and approximately 2 P.M. But Kathlee had seen Irish in Sanborn as early as 11:30 A.M. She would swear. So Irish could not have been the murderer, that was a fact. *Nedra, you saw him, too. Say you did. Say you did! Just say what's TRUE.*

But I could not. I became dizzy, and stammered; and shook so bad, it was speculated I might be "epileptic." That was when my eyes began to worsen. For I could not swear what I had seen, because Kathlee insisted I had not seen it, how then could I swear what I had not seen?

The look in my sister's eyes! Like mica glinting in the sun.

The change that came over my sister, and would never go away.

She is in love. She isn't Kathlee now. So fierce, I believed she might have clawed out my eyes like a cat. But even earlier, at Olcott. A wildness in her. For no boy had ever kissed her before that day as Irish McEwan kissed her (I'm sure of it!) where they drifted off away from me. Where I stood barefoot in the smelly surf tossing broken clamshells out into the lake. Calling after them jeering *Kiss-kiss! You're disgusting! I hate you both!*

But the wind blew my words away.

Wished I hadn't gone to Olcott with them that day. And on that ride to the McEwan farm! Irish had been drinking but was not

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drunk I'm sure. He was excitable, and jumpy, but you could say that was only natural because he feared the old man who was known for his bad temper and his cruelty to his wife and children. For sure, Irish's father had beaten them all. It would come out in the papers. And you could say that the dog Mick, who'd known Irish all its life and was frightened of him that day and ran under the porch to hide, had been terrified by the murders, the screaming and shouting, and by the awful smell of death that all animals can identify.

The flies! I feel them brushing my lips sometimes. My eyelashes. Wake up screaming.

The ax, no I did not see any ax. (Never would the *murder weapon* be found. People said he'd buried it or dropped it in the Yew River.) I saw no ax in the front room, but I would later learn the murder weapon was a double-edged ax, investigators concluded; and the McEwans' ax was missing from the farm, never to be found. In the first shock of seeing the bodies Irish would think his father and brother had been killed by shotgun blasts. And Irish would say to us, he knew who the murderer was. He knew! Saying in a dull slow voice *There's somebody wanted Pa dead for a long time, now it's happened.* But when police came, Irish would not tell them this. He would tell no one these words, ever again.

I never lied, because I never gave testimony. And if I had sworn, I would not have lied because I could not remember except what was confused and rushing as a bad dream. I was a plain girl with a silly streak and I would grow into a plain woman with a melancholy heart. Except when I look at my niece Holly, then my heart swells with something like happiness. For I love this child like my own. For I have never had any daughter, and never will. It's true that I have a certain weakness for my students (I teach seventh-grade English at Strykersville Junior High) and in their eyes I am Miss Hogan, one of the no-nonsense, funny, enjoyable teachers, for I hide my melancholy from them, but my affection isn't very real or lasting and as soon as school ends in June, I cease to think of the children and will scarcely remember them in the future. Maybe I am not a happy woman but I believe that happiness is a region in which we can dwell, if only for brief periods of time. And when I am with Kathlee and Holly my niece, I dwell in such happiness. For they are my family, mostly; and when I am with them I behave like a happy woman, and so it might be so.

Kathlee. The fact is, Irish McEwan *had not been* at his father's house that morning, he *first saw the bodies past 5 P.M.* of that day, stopping at the farm with Nedra and me. But many were doubtful of him, at first. For a long time it was hard. How people want to believe the worst, oh I came to know how people are, even Chris-

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tians: in your hearts mean and malicious and hurtful. And yet—meeting Irish as people did, looking into his eyes that were a warm rich brown, a burning brown, almost black, those beautiful eyes, you would see the goodness in him, and come to believe him, too.

The police questioned so many men, why'd anybody wish to focus upon Irish? Yet there are people who wish to believe the worst: that a son would murder his father (and his older brother!) in such a terrible way. But what about Melvin Hooker who lived next door, it was known there was an old feud between him and the McEwans, Malachi had shot one of Hooker's dogs claiming it had killed some of his chickens. And there were men Malachi owed money to, scattered about. And his son Petey he was always fighting with. And the Medinas, the family of Malachi's deceased wife Anne, who bitterly hated Malachi for his treatment of her. It was said that Malachi had ceased to love and respect his wife during her first pregnancy, and she would have six children! By the time she was wasting away with breast cancer, and bald from chemotherapy, Malachi made no secret of his revulsion for her, even to their children. And made no secret of his affairs with women.

Like the wind in the dried cornfields the whisper came to me. *If ever a man deserved death. And a hard death. If ever a man deserved God's vengeance.*

But Irish was not one to speak ill of the dead. In all things, Irish was respectful. We were married in the Methodist Church and our baby baptized in that faith. In time, my mother came to accept my husband and even, I believe, to love him. My father, being ill with diabetes, and set in his mind against us, never came to truly know Irish nor even, to that old man's shame, his beautiful granddaughter.

Irish said, *He's a good man, Kathlee. But troubled in his heart.*

Irish said, *He's an old man. It isn't for us to judge him.*

It was a fact, Irish McEwan and I were deeply in love when we got married. But it was not to be an easy marriage, with such a shadow over us, like great bruised-looking clouds over Lake Ontario you look up and see, surprised, where a few minutes before the sky had been clear. For people persisted in saying mean things behind our backs. For it was not easy for Irish to keep a job, which was why we moved so often. And there was Irish's weakness for drinking, like all the McEwan men, his only true reliable happiness he spoke of it, shamefacedly, wishing he might change, yet finding it so very hard to change, as I could sympathize, for I had such a bad habit of smoking, like a leech was sucking at me with its ugly lips, for years. Yet it was a fact: Irish was a good husband, and a good father, as far as he could be. I under-

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stood he was troubled in his mind, that the true murderer of his father and brother was never arrested. He seemed to know and to accept who it was. That first hour, at the farm, when he'd discovered the bodies, and shielded me from seeing, where I had come up behind him like a silly little fool, he'd known who it was, most likely, the murderer, but never would he say. Never, questioned by police, would he accuse another, even to defend himself.

Tell them what you know, honey. I begged him.

What do I know? Irish asked, lifting his hands and smiling. *You tell me, baby.*

Of course, all the McEwan sons were questioned by police. The thirty-six-year-old biker who lived in Niagara Falls, and had a criminal record, Irish's half-brother, was a strong suspect. But nothing was ever proven against him. Like Irish, Petey McEwan could account for where he was at the time of the murders. And it was miles away. There was a woman who claimed he was with her, and maybe this was so.

The family farm was only twelve acres. Mostly mortgaged from a Yewville bank. In time, the property would go to Malachi McEwan's surviving sons and daughters, but it would be near-worthless after taxes and other assessments, and not a one of the heirs would wish to live there, nor even to visit it, as I said to Irish we might do, one day, a crazy idea I guess it was, but an idea that came into my head, and I spoke without thinking, *Honey, why don't we drive out to the farm before it's sold, and show Holly?*

Holly was just two years old then. We were living in Yewville.

Irish said, *Show Holly what?*

The farm. Where you grew up. The land, the barn . . .

The house? You'd want to show her the house?

It's been cleaned, hasn't it?

Has it?

Well, I mean, and here I began to stammer, feeling such a fool, and Irish staring at me with this tight little smile of his meaning he's pissed, but trying not to let on,—*hasn't it? Been cleaned?*

I had not looked into the front room. As Nedra claimed she had. I saw only just a blur, a dizziness before my eyes. There were vivid crimson blotches and a frenzied glinting (I would learn later these were horseflies! ugly nasty horseflies) but I saw nothing, and I did not know. And now Irish was waiting for me to answer—what? I could not even think what we'd been speaking of! My thoughts were so confused.

Then I remembered: Yes, the house had been cleaned. Of course! How could such a property be sold, otherwise? After the police took away what they wished. Nobody in the McEwan family wished to do such a task, so the janitor at the high school was hired, and scrubbed the floorboards and the walls and whatever.

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And the filthy old blood-soaked carpet had been hauled away by police, for their investigation. So the "parlor" might now be clean. But we would never step into that place of death of course, I never meant that Holly would see that room! This I would have explained to Irish except—where had Irish gone?

Out in the driveway I heard the pickup start. He'd be gone through the night probably, and one day, some years into the future, when Holly was in junior high, he wouldn't come back at all.

That night I watched Holly sleeping in her little bed as often I did. Not in concern that she would cease breathing, as nervous mothers do, but in a trance of love for her. *Your grandfather had to die,* the sudden thought came to me, *that you might be born.* A great happiness filled my heart. A great calmness came over me. What I knew seemed too great for what I could comprehend in an actual thought, as a mother knows by instinct her child's need. As when I was nursing Holly, in a distant room I could feel her waking and hungry for the breast, and my breasts would seem to waken too, leaking sweet warm milk, and in my trance of love I would hurry to her.

For my life is about her, my baby. It is not about Irish McEwan after all.

Nedra. Those nights! When I couldn't sleep. When Kathlee didn't want to share a room with me any longer, saying I made her nervous, so I had to sleep in a tiny room hardly more than a closet, in the upstairs hall. When my eyes began to go bad, from so much reading. Bright-lighted pages (from a crooknecked lamp by my bed) and beyond the pages darkness. My eyes stared, stared at the print until it melted into a blur. And a faint buzzing began I would refuse to hear knowing it was not real. Sometimes then I would jump from bed to use the bathroom, or I would tiptoe to a window on the landing where some nights, by moonlight, you could see the lake a few miles away, a thin strip of mist at the horizon. Most nights there was only a thickness like smoke and no moon, and no stars.

For my niece Holly's second birthday I would give her a big box of Crayolas. Like the crayons I'd loved when I was a little girl. And we would draw together, my niece and I, and tell each other silly stories.

Holly used to laugh, and touch my cheek. "Auntie Neda, I love you!"

The story of what I saw but had not seen. And what I had not seen, I would see and tell myself all my life. ●

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Pulling Strings

by Percy Spurlark Parker

Most fictional amateur sleuths enter into their investigations with enthusiasm. Not so Percy Spurlark Parker's Big Bull Benson, who gets involved in detective work mostly under pressure from the police. Bull is a gambler who lives on the boundary of the law, a position which makes him useful in solving police cases. Bull is author Parker's only series character, a protagonist he finds it worthwhile to return to again and again.

Big Bull Benson, with hands cuffed behind him, was hauled out of the backseat of the unmarked police car. The detective doing the hauling was young, blond to the point of being white-haired. He was the one who'd slapped the cuffs on, getting the bracelets around Bull's thick wrists with some effort.

The young detective had barged into Bull's office at the Bull Pen, the bar that took up most of the first floor of the Benson Hotel. He'd flashed his badge and promptly announced, "You're wanted at the station, Benson."

"What for?"

"Lieutenant Dantoni'll tell you when you get there." The cuffs had been next, and Bull was marched out of the bar and into the police car.

Bull and Lt. Bertrum Dantoni had bumped heads a few times over the years, nothing spectacular. They didn't like each other, and neither took a step to change the situation. The status quo had been maintained primarily due to Bull living on the south side of the city, while Dantoni worked out of one of the west-side precincts. But about five months ago Dantoni had been transferred to Moore Street.

It would probably be easier to guess the number of jelly beans in a gallon jar than it would be to come up with the number of times Bull had been inside Moore Street. Most of the time, he had to admit, was at the request of the police department. It was a familiar place to him, as were the faces of many of the uniform cops and detectives. A few started to speak, noticed he was in custody, and shied away. Bull's relationship with the police ran the gamut,

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depending on who he was dealing with. There were a couple of hard cases like Dantoni, but Detective Sergeant Vern Wonler was his oldest and closest friend. Their story was simple enough: two black kids from the hood growing up on the streets together, their adult lives taking different directions.

Dantoni was seated behind a paper-cluttered desk when Bull was ushered into his office. He looked up with a sneer. "Close the door, Billy."

The young detective complied.

Dantoni had gotten his thick eyebrows and tight black curly hair from his father. His tan complexion and heavy lips were the influence of his mother's side of the family. His attitude was all his own. "Sit your ass down, Benson."

Bull had been working on his weight of late, but he was still well over two seventy in a six-six frame. An imposing figure to be standing over someone seated at a desk. Bull knew Dantoni didn't like him staring down at him.

"I said sit down."

Bull didn't move toward the chair in front of the desk, twisting his arms around instead to show Dantoni the cuffs. "These your idea?"

Dantoni shrugged. "We cuff criminals around here, Benson."

"What am I being charged with?"

"Nothing yet, just thought I'd get you used to wearing them. Billy . . ."

The young detective stepped over and unlocked the cuffs. Bull rubbed his wrists, moving his hands back and forth as he sat down. There hadn't been much slack in the cuffs and it was a relief getting them off.

"What's this all about, Dantoni?"

"Lieutenant, or Lieutenant Dantoni, either one's acceptable. I'm the good guy, you're the scumbag. Let's not forget our place."

A good place would be jumping up and down on Dantoni's chest. But Bull took a deep breath and said, "I'll try not to. Lieutenant."

A big smile ripped across Dantoni's clean-shaven face. "When was the last time you saw Pepper Stroger?"

"Is that what this is? You're trying to find that two-bit hustler?"

"No, we've found him already, Benson. We just want to know who killed him."

"He's been skimming by for so long, I didn't think anybody would actually do it." He was being completely truthful. Pepper came with a DO NOT TRUST sign stamped on his forehead. Everyone knew about him. He owed half the books in the city and lied to the other half. Folks dealt with him at their own risk and usually came up short. It was hard to imagine there was someone around that wasn't aware of his reputation.

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"We found him in a dumpster this morning behind Kay & Cee's Liquors on Fifty-seventh. Pockets empty, no watch or other jewelry on him. Guess we're supposed to believe it was a robbery gone bad." Dantoni made a pistol out of his right hand, pointing at Bull. "Single shot, middle of his forehead. You don't know anything about it, right?"

"This is the first I've heard of it," he said, smoothing down the corners of his moustache with his thumb and forefinger. There was a grapevine in the city comprised of people on the fringe, those folks one step this way or that of the law. He tapped into it regularly and it usually kept him informed on what was going down in the city. The news about Pepper had gotten by him.

Dantoni leaned back in his chair. "You just going to play dumb on this, Benson?"

"If I don't know, I don't know."

"I suggest you find out."

"I own a bar and a hotel, Lieutenant. You're the police."

"He was one of yours, Benson. Practically dumped in your backyard. I would think you'd want to pay the bastards back who did this."

"Pepper was a two-bit punk who'd been flirting with getting himself killed for a long time. He wasn't a relative, or a close friend. I've got no reason to be concerned."

Dantoni straightened, his elbows on his desk. "As I said, he was one of yours, Benson, part of the criminal element in the city. Now, if you're not willing to help, I've got to ask myself why, and phrases like obstructing justice come to mind."

"You're full of . . ."

"Maybe I am. But you're either with me or against me on this. You're the great Bull Benson. You've got your finger on the pulse of the city's black population. First-name basis with all the crime bosses. You can do this, Benson. I want to know everything about Stroger six ways from Sunday. Who he's been dealing with, what he was into, who had it in for him. Tomorrow morning will do."

"Just like that, huh? I'm supposed to jump to it?"

"You get the picture, unless obstructing justice is too soft a term. Like 'accessory to murder' better?"

"Can I go now?"

"As long as we understand each other. With me or against me, Benson. If you don't come through, I've got to start looking at you as being involved."

Bull fired up a cigar as he stepped out of the precinct building, but it wasn't just the tip of his cigar doing a burn. He hadn't thought about Pepper Stroger for months, and certainly didn't have anything to do with his death. But Dantoni had made it his beef. Why? Because he could, for one thing, whether there was

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another motive or not. Some folks were like that: They got the power, they use it, they pull the strings, for no other reason than that.

The cops had dragged him out to the precinct, but they weren't offering any free return trips. He walked up to the corner to see if he could find a cab; they weren't the most plentiful things in this neighborhood. Who killed Pepper Stroger? He might as well get a phone book and start with the A's. Bull doubted if there was a single person Pepper had come in contact with that he hadn't crossed as least once.

Why did people continue to deal with him? Pepper was a liar, a thief, a cheat, but he was also a charmer. A little guy, no more than five-six or five-seven, high yellow, with freckles and a thick mane of sandy red hair. He had a quick smile that never appeared phony. Give him five minutes and he could talk a person into, or out of, most anything. So, what had gone wrong? Getting a slug in the head and being thrown into a dumpster doesn't happen by accident.

A car horn blew. He recognized the green Chevy as it pulled up to the curb, its passenger window sliding down on automatic gears. Forest Westerfield leaned toward him from behind the steering wheel, "Guess I don't have to rescue you, or did you escape?"

"Naw, they let me go this time," he said, climbing into the Chevy. "How did you know I was here?"

"Sam called me when he wasn't able to get in touch with Chet." Sam was his bartender at the Bull Pen; Chet, his lawyer. "What happened?"

Wes had moved up to assistant managing editor at the *Daily Challenger* these days, but he still did a column three times a week. The *Challenger* kept the black population informed on what was going on in the city, and Bull counted Wes as a true friend. He gave him a brief rundown of what had transpired at Moore Street.

Wes pushed his thick-framed glasses back on his nose, guided the Chevy onto the street. "I never liked that Dantoni. Knew him when he was a beat cop. Arrogant S.O.B. if there ever was one."

"Well, I've got to deal with him now."

"I don't get it. Why hassle you about Pepper?"

"Hell if I know. I was wondering about that myself. Think he's just got some burr up his butt where I'm concerned."

"Guess life just isn't going to get easy for you."

"True enough," Bull replied. He'd felt that way for some time. He was a gambler by definition, although he didn't list it as his occupation on his tax returns. He had his hotel, money in the bank, a few shares of stock here and there, yet life for him had never been a smooth ride. Risky, if not out-and-out dangerous situations

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seemed to come his way. Pulled into them by friends, sometimes foes, with the cops waiting in the shadows for him to slip up. No, it wasn't an easy life, but it was his, he was used to it.

"We've had a reporter working on the story since the first word of Pepper being found came over the police band. If we get anything of interest, I'll pass it on."

"Thanks. I'm not sure what Dantoni expects, but every bit'll help."

Wes shrugged. He'd oversimplified his job once by telling Bull it was just a matter of writing down what people did and putting it in the paper. But Bull knew Wes was not the seat-of-the-pants type. There was thought and planning that went into his column, and it showed with each edition.

Wes let Bull out in front of the Bull Pen, promising to catch up with him later in the evening or perhaps for breakfast in the morning. Breakfast sounded like a better idea to Bull, and they parted with a meet set for nine-thirty.

Sam Devlin was behind the bar when Bull walked in. Sam wasn't growing old gracefully. He'd been bald for a number of years, his dark skin tight about his skull. He'd never weighed much, more bone than skin, it seemed, and he was becoming noticeably stoop-shouldered, the spryness going out of his step.

"Cops playin' games again?" Sam asked, the ever-present toothpick in the corner of his mouth.

"Lieutenant Dantoni getting his jollies for the day."

Sam slid a shot of Grandad toward him. "I called Chet 'fore you'd pulled away from the curb, but he's in court. His secretary said she'd send over one of his associates. Didn't know what else ta do, so I called Wes."

"I ran into Wes, but I was probably gone by the time Chet's man got there. Better call 'em back and tell his secretary it was a false alarm."

Sam offered a nod as a reply. They had been together for a lot of years. Back in the early days, Sam had been the one who'd taken Bull under his wing and showed him what a deck of cards could do. A good deal of what he had become, he owed to Sam. Thus, Sam's "job" at the Bull Pen was just a small measure of the payback.

"This got anything to do with Pepper being found dead?" Sam asked.

Bull was about to polish off the Grandad when he stopped and looked to Sam for an explanation.

"Bebe and Curt both called while you was gone. Wanted to know if'n you'd heard about it. Took him outa a dumpster this morning. Shot in the head, they said."

Well, at least the grapevine was still working, even though it had been a step slow this time. "Yeah, that's what it was about," he

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said, downing the bourbon and making his way back to his office.

He sat at his desk straightening some papers he'd been working on when Dantoni's errand boy had arrived, then sat there for a few moments more doing a lot of nothing. He had a decision to make. He didn't know who killed Pepper, and didn't really care all that much. But Dantoni could cause him problems. He could ignore Dantoni and risk his carrying out his threat, or gather as much info about Pepper as he could and dump it into Dantoni's lap, which was still no guarantee it would keep Dantoni off his back. It was a classic lose-lose situation.

He dialed Vern's beeper number and got a response almost instantly.

"Heard you paid us a visit, sorry I missed you."

"There was nothing you could've done, Vern, 'cept maybe got your butt in the wringer along with mine."

"Lieutenant told me about it. Seemed pretty pleased with himself."

"Yeah, he showed me a lot of teeth, too. Look, what have you got on this?"

"Not much. Small-caliber slug, probably a twenty-two, close range."

The image of Pepper showing off a pearl-handled .25 automatic flashed in Bull's mind. It was maybe a year ago. Pepper had said he had a couple dozen of the Saturday night specials he was trying to sell.

"He was killed somewhere else and transported to the dumpster," Vern continued. "M.E. puts his death at around twelve midnight, couple hours either way."

Close range would indicate Pepper knew the person who killed him, but it didn't necessarily mean it'd gone down that way. Strangers have walked up to people on the street and started blasting away.

"Got any idea why Dantoni's laying this at my door?"

"No more than he's got a thing for you."

"Yeah, well, I guess I've got to get busy," he said, feeling the reluctance within himself and knowing that part of it was him hating to be forced into doing something he wanted no part of. "Anybody contact Cora yet?"

"That's what I was doing. The lieutenant and Billy Wingate are handling the case, but since I know her, I took her to the morgue to ID the body. Not that every cop in the precinct couldn't do it, but she was the closest thing Pepper had to a wife, and I thought it might go a little easier on her instead of letting the lieutenant's pet do it."

Bull had never been able to figure it, but Pepper and Cora had been together for as long as he'd known either of them. They were truly complete opposites. Pepper was a hustler and had never held a legit job more than six months in his life. Cora had worked with

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the night maintenance crew downtown at the Universal Insurance Exchange for at least ten years that Bull knew of. She was nearly a foot taller than Pepper and a good hundred pounds heavier. He was light skinned, she was charcoal. He had his quick smile. She had a permanent frown due to a scar that pinched the left corner of her mouth and locked it that way, a souvenir from a dog bite she'd gotten as a kid.

"How she take it?"

"You know Cora's personality, Bull. At best she's lukewarm."

"She give you any idea what Pepper was into lately?"

"No. Said he never told her anything about his business and she never asked."

A lot of couples were like that; then again, a lot of folks didn't like talking to the cops. He didn't stay on the line with Vern much longer, just enough to verify Cora and Pepper's address, and to promise to check back in with Vern later.

Hanging up, he hadn't gotten his hand off the receiver when the phone rang. Cherry T., another member of the grapevine with late news about Pepper. He thanked her, asked her to keep him posted if anything else came her way.

Pepper and Cora's apartment was on the top floor of a three-floor walk-up on Snider Avenue. Depending on how it was counted, the distance from Bull's hotel to their apartment building was roughly twenty-five blocks, with the spot where Pepper was found pretty close to being at midpoint. Dantoni was on the money when he'd said Pepper had been dumped in Bull's backyard.

"Bull," Cora said with a nod, answering the door to his knock.

"Cora. Sorry to hear about Pepper."

"Yeah, well," she said. The crooked scar at the corner of her mouth seemed to be trying to pull her lips inside; it sometimes caused her to slur.

A projection TV was the first thing that confronted him as he stepped inside, a fifty-inch screen at least. A tan leather sectional crowded the rest of the room. Fruits of Pepper's wheeling and dealing, no doubt.

"Have a seat," Cora said. She was dressed in jeans and a pullover sweater, house slippers. Even with her size, the clothes were large enough to be baggy on her. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Actually, I came by to see if there was anything I could do for you," he said, taking a seat on the sectional. It was a fine grade of leather; well-padded cushions comfortably withstood his weight. About three grand at retail, he guessed, which wasn't to say that was what it'd cost Pepper.

"I'll be okay, Bull. I had Pepper on my insurance from work. I'll

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have enough to put him away nice. I've got scotch, vodka . . . that's right, you like bourbon."

She was rather matter-of-fact about everything, her tone flat, the only residue of emotion showing in the redness of her eyes where it was evident she'd been crying.

She didn't ask again, but brought him an Old-Fashioned glass half full with bourbon and ice, and then fixed herself a vodka and lime. There was a suitcase on the floor by the other end of the sectional. She moved it out of the way before sitting down. "I've been packing some of Pepper's things," she said, giving the suitcase another little push. She paused. "I'd thank you for your offer, Bull, but I don't think that's why you're really here."

He tipped his glass to her, drank. "Cops got me in a pinch. Think I know more about Pepper than I do. Thought you might be able to help me out."

She sampled her own drink, swirled the ice around in her glass, took another swallow. "I ain't got nothing for you or them," she said. "Pepper never told me what he was doing and I never asked."

"I didn't just come in off the farm, Cora. Now, I don't for a minute believe Pepper reported to you point by point all the crap he was into. But I also don't believe you were so damn dumb you don't know some of what was going on."

She looked at him for a long time, the frown growing somewhat. She started to take another drink, returned the glass to the cocktail table in front of her. "It could be just what it looks like, a robbery."

"Yeah, it could."

She took another moment. "He was doing something with Milly Five Spot. I don't know what. Just, he kept saying it was big."

Milly Five Spot, real name Milford Potts, was one of the up-and-coming books on the south side. He'd blown into town a few years back, starting off fairly small. He had a rep for taking most any wager and paying off promptly, which was giving him a growing following. But if owed, he expected to be paid promptly as well.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Past couple months, I think, maybe a little longer."

"And you've got no idea of what he was doing?"

"None. Just another one of Pepper's schemes, I guess. He had a good mind, Bull. I was after him for years to put it to a better use. He could've been most anything."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Last night, about nine, just before I went to work."

"He seem any different? Say anything?"

She shook her head, tried her drink this time.

He couldn't tell if she was holding anything else back. There was a good chance she was, and an even better chance she actually thought Milly Five Spot had something to do with Pepper's death.

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Milly Five Spot operated out of a doughnut shop in the 88th Street strip mall, a little sliver of a storefront wedged between a pet store and a unisex beauty salon. There were four customers in the place when Bull entered, two on stools at opposite ends of the small counter and a couple huddled together at one of the three tables.

"What will it be today, sir?" She was quite a little package, young, chestnut tan, with bright brown eyes and dimpled cheeks, her hair curled loosely about her head. The name tag on her golden starched uniform read WANIQUEKA.

"Is Milly in?"

The dude on the stool to his left stirred. Bull hadn't paid much attention to him except to notice he was taking up a lot of space.

"What's happenin', Bull?" It was Troy Ellison, Milly's all-around everything. If Milly wanted a paper, Troy was halfway to the newsstand. A sandwich, no restaurant was too far. Someone's head bashed in, Troy could handle that on the way back.

"How's it going, Troy?"

"Can't complain." He was missing a front tooth and had probably had his nose broken a couple of times by the crooked way it sat. He was as big as Bull, younger, perhaps stronger. So far, they hadn't had to test each other. He got off the stool, gave a nod. "Come on, Milly's in back."

"Can't I get a doughnut first?" Bull asked, looking back at Waniqueka. Her shy little smile perked her dimples.

"Sure thing," Troy chuckled. "Get the man what he wants, babe."

Bull had been in small offices before, but with Milly Five Spot on one side of the desk, and himself and Troy on the other, there seemed to be just enough room remaining to prevent them from bumping into each other.

"Good to see you again, Bull," Milly said, reaching over to shake hands. He had long thin fingers, but a strong grip. His eyebrows were as thick as his moustache, his head was shaven bald, and he sported a diamond stud in each ear. "When you gonna give me a chance to get even?"

"You name it," Bull replied. It had been about a month ago, in the back room of Felix's Fried Fish Haven. The game was poker, and a couple of times the hands had come down to a head-to-head with Bull and Milly. Bull had come out on top both times. When Milly left the game he claimed to've dropped six hundred dollars.

Milly leaned back, smiling. "Naw, you're too eager. I'll keep playing Troy, he doesn't try to win."

Everyone laughed, Troy the loudest.

"So, Bull, why the visit?"

"Had a taste for something sweet," he said, pulling back a cor-

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ner of the napkin and taking a bite of the cinnamon bun he'd gotten from Waniqueka.

"Should've called. I'd had Troy bring you a dozen."

"I'll remember that next time," he said, sitting the cinnamon bun on the desk. Small talk was never one of his strong suits. "Cops pulled Pepper out of a garbage dumpster this morning."

"Dead?" Troy asked.

"As dead as a slug in the head will make you. Word is, you had some business with him, Milly."

Milly shrugged. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. Cops know who did it?"

Bull smoothed down the corners of his moustache. "I don't think they really care. They just as well saddle you for it as me, or a half-dozen others, as long as they can scratch it off their books."

"Well, I don't remember killing anybody lately. You, Troy?"

Troy's big shoulders rose slightly. "Not lately," he grinned.

"So, I can erase you two as suspects?"

"Absolutely, Bull. Troy and me are innocent. Go back and tell the cops to look somewhere else."

"It's not going to be that easy, Milly. They're going to want to know some things. They're going to want to have a reason not to keep looking in your direction."

"Besides this honest face of mine?"'

"Besides your honest face."

Milly nodded, took another moment. "How much sweat you think this is going to cause me?"

"Hell if I know. Lieutenant Dantoni at Moore Street pulled me into this, and he can be a hard-ass."

"So I hear," Milly said, reaching over and picking up the cinnamon bun and biting into it. "These are my favorite, you know, cinnamon buns and chocolate raised doughnuts. I've made a meal out of them many a day."

Bull didn't respond to Milly's rambling, just watched him as he took another bite then dropped the remainder of the bun back onto the desk.

"I'm being straight with you, Bull. I didn't do Pepper. He's been working for me for the past three, four months."

"Doing what?"

"The cops don't need to know about this, see?"

"Go on," Bull said, without giving him any more assurance than that.

"Got this idea about organizing the books in town. I won't go into the particulars, but it'll make it better for everybody. Pepper's been my go-between with the other books. The big boys, the nickel and dimers."

"Kind of ambitious, isn't it?"

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Milly shrugged. "I've got plans, Bull."

"And you trusted Pepper?"

"Pepper was always out for himself, I knew that. All I had to do was convince him the best way to take care of himself was to take care of me. I didn't have to worry about trusting him, we were on the same team. I even gave his girlfriend a job."

"Cora?"

Milly shook his head. "Naw, Waniqueka. The doll up front. She's a knockout, isn't she? I had an opening for a counter girl and Pepper brought her to me."

"I didn't know he was running a personnel service."

"Just one of those things that happened to work out. He knew I needed somebody, and there she was. But honestly, if she hadn't been Pepper's squeeze, I'd have her in a penthouse by now."

"Yeah, how so?"

"She's been coming on to me ever since she got here. It's been rough, but most of the time I've kept hands off. Pepper was crazy about her, and I didn't want to risk messing up the stuff he was doing for me. So to keep the harmony, I put any thoughts I had of her on the back burner. Guess I don't have to do that now."

Pepper wasn't a choir boy, so there was no reason to think there hadn't been other women in his life besides Cora. Nor was there any reason to think Cora didn't know about them. She may have ignored it, not admitted it to herself, but she had to've known.

Thus, the revelation about Waniqueka was of no more importance than anything else he'd learned so far.

"You going to tell her about Pepper, or should I?" Milly asked. "She's going to need some consoling; maybe it'll be best if I tell her."

"Why don't we both do it?" Bull suggested.

Milly hunched his shoulders slightly. "Sure, why not? Troy, take over the counter and send her back here."

Troy didn't look too pleased with the idea, but his expression was all the protest he offered. He got up, squeaking by Bull as he left the office.

"You get any flak from anybody about this idea of yours?"

"There's always opposition to new ideas, but nothing so serious they'd pop Pepper for it. If that was the case, why not come after me? It was my idea."

"Maybe it was just a warning. You know, kill the messenger."

"A simple no would work just as well."

"The folks you're dealing with aren't known for their vocal communicative skills."

"True, that," Milly said. "You know, Thumbs Murphy has been giving me some opposition on this thing. Nothing really heavy, though."

Murphy got his nickname by breaking the thumbs of slow-

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paying customers. "Think I ought to check with him next?"

Waniqueka came in before Milly had a chance to reply. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Potts?"

"Yeah, ah, have a seat."

She took the chair Troy had occupied.

"Waniqueka . . ." Milly started.

"We need to know when was the last time you saw Pepper?" Bull cut in, but trying not to sound too harsh.

She looked at him, her brow wrinkling, then over to Milly. Milly nodded. "Yesterday afternoon, here in the shop. He didn't come home last night."

"Home?"

"Well, to my apartment. We've been spending a lot of time together lately."

"Pepper's been staying over?"

She sat up straighter in the chair, crossed her legs. It was a hell of an image. The simple shift in posture molded the uniform to her body and exposed a wealth of thigh and smooth, shapely legs. It was a statement unto itself. Given the chance, why wouldn't any man stay over?

"Did Pepper tell you where he was going when he left here?"

"You some kind of cop, mister?"

"No, I'm just trying to put some things together." He paused for a moment. There was no sense in putting it off any longer. "Pepper was found murdered this morning," he said, going into detail, and watched her face fall apart.

More wrinkles ripped across her forehead, her eyes got wider, and there was a definite tremor in her lower lip. She jumped to her feet, looking directly at Milly. "You killed him," she shouted. "You found out what he was doing. I told him to be careful."

Then she was gone, running out of the office, leaving Bull and Milly there to stare at each other.

Bull thought about tracking down Thumbs Murphy, but the late-afternoon traffic was pretty heavy, and Murphy hung out on the other side of town. He'd have to try catching up with him later, maybe around dinnertime. Murphy worked out of a back room at the Charcoal Pit. They did a mean slab of ribs in that joint.

On his way back to the Bull Pen, he tried to make some sense of what had gone on at the doughnut shop. Waniqueka's abrupt departure could have meant a number of things. She could have run in fear for her life. She'd accused Milly of murder, of discovering some double-cross Pepper had in the works, which she, at the very least, was aware of. Murder is generally not a bookie's trademark, not that it hasn't been done. Threats, bruises, and broken bones are the methods they usually use to encourage speedy pay-

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ment. But if Milly's big plans were being compromised, his move to the top impeded, murder wasn't such a farfetched payback.

Or, Waniqueka's stunt could just have been a big show, an act. She could have killed Pepper and been waiting for the first opportunity to point the finger at someone else. She had gone off pretty quickly. A fit of nerves, or a staged performance? It could go either way. But what reason would she have to kill Pepper? Accident? Lovers' quarrel? Maybe she just got tired of him being around.

And, of course, it could have been someone else altogether. As he'd mentioned to Milly, one of the other bookies in town might've been sending a message without risking an open confrontation. Like Thumbs Murphy, for instance. Killing Pepper wouldn't give Milly cause to retaliate, he wouldn't be worth the bother. But it would tell Milly his organizing plans were heading for trouble and might best be forgotten.

Sam had several notes for him when he returned, scrawled in the chicken scratch he called his handwriting. There was a time Bull would've had to do some long, hard studying to figure out what Sam wrote, but now it was almost second nature to him. Chet was finished with court for today and said he'd be at his office if needed. Vern called saying they thought they'd found the murder weapon. A pearl-handled .25 automatic had turned up in a dumpster a block away from where Pepper was discovered. Sidney Daggat wanted to see him about renting the Bull Pen one Saturday next month for his wife's birthday party. And Cherry T. had called, leaving a number where she could be reached.

"Bull?"

He'd made the call from his office, sitting at his desk, a fresh-lit cigar in the ashtray "Yeah, Cherry, you called?"

"You said you wanted to know if I came across anything else about Pepper."

"Sure, glad you did. What did you find out?"

"Well, really nothing much. But I thought you might want to know, anyway."

"Whatever you got, I'll be grateful for it.'"

"As I said, it's not much. . . . "

"Cherry." As helpful as she'd been in the past, she generally took some coaxing.

"He spent most of the evening at the Pool Q. You know Thadius, Quebie's brother-in-law, he manages the place off and on? Says Pepper was there till about seven, seven-thirty."

"He say if anything happened? If Pepper met anybody, or the kind of mood he was in?"

"Told me Pepper just spent the time playing a few games with the locals. Bunch of beer, but he wasn't drunk. A lot of talk about the upcoming football season."

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"Nothing out of the usual?"

"Not that he mentioned."

He called the Pool Q after he finished talking to Cherry. Thadius wasn't there but Yolonda, the bartender, was. She backed up Cherry's secondhand story. Pepper had been at the joint for most of the evening. He'd won about as many games as he'd lost and no one seemed to care one way or the other. Only she thought he'd left after eight.

Bull pulled hard on his cigar, expelling the smoke slowly, taking inventory of the situation. Just what the hell did he have? Not a lot, really. Pepper had spent a pleasant enough time at the pool hall. He hadn't gotten into any fights or confrontations. He'd gone home and had dinner with Cora, evidently leaving the apartment after she'd gone to work, and got himself killed. Apparently with one of the guns from that batch he was trying to peddle.

Waniqueka had said he hadn't come by her place last night. And Milly had said he wasn't running any errands for him. If they were all telling the truth, then it left them out of the loop as suspects. Yet Waniqueka had accused Milly of killing Pepper. Something Milly had found out, she'd said. Something she'd warned Pepper to be careful about. But what?

There was Thumbs Murphy to check out, but Waniqueka was the one he needed to talk to next, if only he had her address, and if she wasn't in hiding. Was her life really in danger? He couldn't be sure. And if he kept going, what about his own neck? Maybe he should just give what he had so far to Dantoni and hope it would satisfy him.

He was in the process of trying to decide when the door to his office swung open. Just as before, without so much as a tap on the door to announce his arrival, detective Billy Wingate, the young blond cop from this morning, marched up to his desk.

"Now what?"

"Lieutenant wants you back at the precinct."

They didn't do the handcuff bit this time, so walking through the precinct to Dantoni's office was a more pleasurable experience than it had been earlier. He even got a few nods and hellos from officers he passed.

Dantoni was seated behind his desk when Bull came in. This time he wasn't in his office alone. Vern stood by the file cabinet, tall and lanky, his tie loose about his neck. The expression on his long face wasn't giving up much. Perched on one of the chairs in front of the desk, seemingly refreshed and in control, sat Waniqueka.

Somewhere during her flight for life she'd managed to stop and change clothes. She was wearing a flower-print blouse, a black

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leather jacket, and a very short black leather skirt, black hose, and at least three-inch heels.

"Park it, Benson," Dantoni barked.

He took the other chair in front of the desk. Detective Wingate stood somewhere behind him.

"You know Miss Hall?" Dantoni said.

Waniqueka smiled at him. "Excuse the earlier theatrics, Mr. Benson, but the news about Pepper took me by surprise."

"I take it you knew who I was back at the doughnut shop?"

"Yes, but I couldn't let on. You weren't anyone I was supposed to know. And I wasn't aware you and the lieutenant had spoken this morning."

Vern stepped away from the file cabinet. "Ms. Hall is writing a book, Bull. An in-depth exposé of the city's gambling industry."

"And Pepper?" he asked.

"He was my main source of information. He got me the names of all the big players in town, where they conducted their business, how the different bookies worked."

"Miss Hall came to me about three weeks ago," Dantoni stated. "Said she had just about finished her book but wanted the last couple of chapters to deal with the police making several arrests."

"She offered to turn over what evidence she had to our lieutenant, here," Vern said, ignoring the look Dantoni trained in his direction. "With the assurance she would be there when the arrests were made."

It was a hell of an arrangement. Dantoni would get the praise for the arrests, and Waniqueka would get a dynamite wrap-up chapter for her book. "I guess somewhere along the line my name was mentioned?" Bull asked. "Pepper gets killed and I become the whipping boy?"

"It was a natural," Dantoni shrugged. "I didn't think you did it, but I figured you might know somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody."

"I did bring your name up along with a number of others," Waniqueka said. "But in all honesty, I never got any information concerning any criminal activity you were involved in. Other than a few high-stakes poker games, that is."

"I could've told you that," he said. "Now what?"

"Now," Vern snapped, "the lieutenant's letting Ms. Hall do our work for us."

"That's enough out of you, Sergeant. We're here, Benson, because Miss Hall has a theory on who killed Stroger. We want to match it with what, if anything, you've found out and go from there."

Waniqueka Hall was really something. She had a hard-ass like Dantoni eating out of her hand, and he didn't even know it. What kind of promises had she made to him, implied or otherwise? For

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that matter, what kind of promises had she made to Pepper?

"Miss Hall believes this Milly Five Spot discovered Stroger was supplying her with information and had him killed," Dantoni said.

"That's it? That's the big theory? It lacks a little something, doesn't it, Lieutenant? Sure, Milly could've had it done, but why not take care of our crime writer too?"

Waniqueka got a little fidgety; she crossed and uncrossed her legs. "I'm . . . I'm not saying Milly knew who Pepper was passing the information on to, just that he knew he was doing it, and he had him killed."

"How do you suppose Milly found out? Was Pepper reporting back to anyone else but you, any cops he could've been seen getting chummy with?"

"No. I was the only one who contacted the police," Waniqueka said. "Lieutenant Dantoni and I only met one other time since then. And today, of course."

"We can rule the lieutenant out," Bull said.

"Thanks," Dantoni spat.

"Would Pepper have told? Let Milly, or some of his friends, in on what you were up to? He wasn't above looking out for himself."

"Absolutely not. Pepper never would've betrayed me. We were more than just coworkers on the project."

"Then that leaves you."

She jumped to her feet. She was good at that move, but this time she didn't run out. "How dare you," she shouted. "I didn't cause Pepper to get killed."

"You're out of line, Benson," Dantoni said.

But he didn't think he was that far off base. If the arrest of several gambling figures would make a great ending to her book, how much more punch would a murder give it? She was one calculating piece of work. She'd been in control from the start, orchestrating everything step by step. He'd thought of Dantoni as pulling strings, but Waniqueka was a master at it. There was Pepper, Milly, and Bull didn't have to guess what had gone on during her second meeting with Dantoni. She'd pulled the strings and they'd danced for her. If she wasn't capable of murder, he didn't know who was.

She stomped off, her stride equal to a Vegas showgirl's. She stopped, turned back, saying, "You have no right to accuse me. Pepper and I had something special. We were practically living together."

"And how long would that have lasted, until the book contracts were signed? Or would you've waited until they hit the bookstores before you sent him packing?"

For a moment she almost smiled. Pepper had been used, Dantoni had been used. Bull wondered how many more she had sniffing at her like a dog in heat. But then he remembered something,

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and it all kind of fell in place.

"You can sit back down now," Bull told her. "You're a conniving little bitch, but you didn't kill Pepper."

She'd started to stomp around again but that stopped her. He nodded toward the chair and she sat back down.

"Pepper hooking up with Milly must've been a gold mine for your book. You really did a number on him. You played a player."

She was actually smiling now. "Can I help it if he fell in love?"

"No. But you didn't try to stop it. I'm betting you even told him you loved him too, and that's what got him killed."

Dantoni swung around in his chair. "What are you talking about, Benson?"

He'd remembered seeing the suitcase in Pepper's apartment, the one Cora had pushed to the side of the sectional. It had been such a little thing then, but now, with everything else, it kind of told the story on its own. Cora wasn't packing away some of Pepper's things. Pepper had done the packing himself; he was moving out. After all the other women Cora had tolerated for years, now here was one Pepper was leaving her for. She wasn't having it.

"Did anybody question Cora about this?" he asked, then laid it out for them. "A good lawyer will probably plead it as an act of passion due to temporary insanity, or something like that. In any case, Cora's not a hardened criminal. She won't have covered her tracks very well. Most likely she killed him in their apartment. The lab boys should be able to come up with enough evidence to back my theory." He put an extra emphasis on the *my* part, let it soak in a bit, then picked back up with, "Pepper wasn't noted for carrying a gun. I'm betting the weapon used was one he gave Cora to protect herself going back and forth to work at night."

"Well, Billy?" Dantoni said. "This has been your case from the start. Did you check out this Cora person?"

"No, I . . . er," the young detective stammered. "You said . . . I mean, I wasn't proceeding along those lines, sir."

"I think you better start then, don't you?"

"Y-Yes, sir. I'll get right on it," he said, starting for the door.

"Hold on, I'll go with you," Vern said, winking at Bull as he crossed the room.

The office got kind of quiet then, with Bull waiting for Dantoni or Waniqueka to say something, but it seemed like everything had been said.

He stood. "I'll be going now."

No objections, just a look of disdain from Dantoni, his mouth in a curt frown. "You just better watch yourself from now on, Benson."

Bull looked from Waniqueka back to Dantoni, gave a light little chuckle. "Funny thing, Lieutenant, I was just about to suggest you do the same." ●

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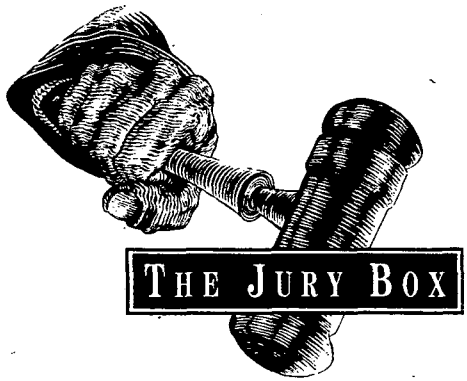

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Clark Howard, whose tales of ex-cons, professional killers, old soldiers, jazz musicians, prize fighters, bootleggers, prostitutes, auto racers, and a wide variety of multicultural misfits and outsiders have captivated readers for more than four decades, is as preeminent in the solidly constructed, exhaustively researched twist-in-the-tail crime story as Edward D. Hoch in the classical detective story. *EQMM* readers have voted Howard five Readers Awards, most recently for the favorite story of 1999.

Surprisingly, there was no collection of his stories in book form until recently. Now there are two, published within months of each other.

**** Clark Howard: *Challenge the Widow-Maker and Other Stories of People in Peril,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 trade paper, $40 signed limited hardcover. The larger of the two, this collection purports to represent the author's best, a dozen stories from the '80s and '90s, eleven from *EQMM* and one from *Ellery Queen's Prime Crimes 2,* including three of Howard's Readers Award winners ("Animals," "Scalplock," and "The Dakar Run"), his Edgar winner "Horn Man," and several other award nominees. A complete bibliography of Howard's books, stories, and articles is appended.

Purchasers of the limited edition get a separate pamphlet of "The Killing Floor," previously unpublished.

**** Clark Howard: *Crowded Lives and Other Stories of Desperation and Danger,* Five Star, $20.95. Though this smaller volume lacks prize winners, such is the consistency of Howard's craftsmanship that the difference in quality is small. Of the nine stories, seven from *EQMM* and two from *AHMM,* all but one are from the '80s—and that one, "The Marksman" (1967), shows the mastery of character

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involvement and surprise in Howard's work is not a recent development.

**** Sarah Caudwell: *The Sibyl in her Grave,* Delacorte, $23.95. The late author's formidable reputation was based on four novels published at increasingly wide intervals over twenty years. The unique gimmick—that, in a feat of authorial wire-walking, the gender of first-person detective Professor Hilary Tamar is never revealed—is only part of the story. The level of wit and puzzle-spinning invites comparison with icons of British detection like Michael Innes and Edmund Crispin at their best, with a dash of John Mortimer in the legal ambiance. The plot of the partly epistolary novel involves insider trading in the City and the death of a psychic-cum-blackmailer in the country.

**** Donald E. Westlake: *The Hook,* Mysterious, $23.95. There is little humor but great irony in the story of best-selling Manhattan novelist Bryce Proctorr, who aims to solve his problems of writer's block and an elongated messy divorce action by enlisting less successful author Wayne Prentice as both ghost writer and killer for hire. Closest comparisons to this grimly involving account are some works of Patricia Highsmith and James M. Cain, though (pardon the heresy) I'm not sure Cain ever wrote anything quite this good. Along with *The Ax* (1997), it belongs among the high points of one of crime fiction's most varied and distinguished bodies of work.

*** Francis M. Nevins: *Beneficiaries' Requiem,* Five Star, $20.95. Loren Mensing, who made his debut as a young law professor in the September 1972 issue of *EQMM,* is the rare fictional detective who has aged in something like real time. Now over fifty, in precarious health and unhappy in his personal and professional life, he visits a small Wisconsin town to help a former student who will lose her standing as one of the beneficiaries of her great-uncle's oddball trust if she fails to marry by age thirty. Meanwhile, someone seems to be picking off the beneficiaries one by one. The small-town ambiance (remember Wrightsville?) and the intricate puzzle (one that classical music lovers will especially enjoy) reaffirm Mensing's status as one of the most Queenian of contemporary sleuths.

** Rochelle Krich: *Dead Air,* Avon Twilight, $23. Talk-show host Renee Altman, a Dr. Laura clone in radio style though not personal life, is plagued by a stalker and asks old friend and LAPD homicide detective Jessie Drake for help. Krich creates effective suspense and has the talk-radio rhythms down pat, but one key plot element is unbelievable: After the widely-publicized kidnapping of her young daughter, Dr. Renee continues to broadcast, chatting with seemingly oblivious advice

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seekers and even sparring with the kidnapper on the air.

** Robert L. Iles: *The Burning Woman and Other Cases from the Files of Peter B. Bruck, Private Investigator,* Avid Press, *www.avidpress.com*, inquire for price. Those nostalgic for writers like Henry Kane and Michael Avallone or for the radio adventures of Sam Spade and Richard Diamond might like these fourteen pastiches narrated in wise-cracking post-World War II style by New York shamus Bruck. All but "The End of It," the longest and best of the group, have been previously published in such mystery fiction magazines as *Murderous Intent, Blue Murder,* and *Red Herring.* The main drawback is the too- frequent reliance on a standard private-eye windup.

Among the reprints is a new edition of one of the cleverest serial-murder puzzles I've ever read, the late William L. DeAndrea's 1979 Edgar winner *The HOG Murders* (International Polygonics, $7.95), including a moving introduction by DeAndrea's widow, Jane Haddam.

An anthology that belongs in every collection is *The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century* (Houghton Mifflin, $28), edited by Tony Hillerman and Otto Penzler, an 813-page, 46-story behemoth that moves chronologically from O. Henry to Dennis Lehane and hits most of the major names (Hammett, Chandler, Woolrich, Queen, Ellin, Highsmith; Lardner, Steinbeck, Runyan, Thurber, Faulkner, Oates) along the way. The most surprising exclusion is Edward D. Hoch, who is represented in the latest *EQMM* anthology, *Crème de la Crime* (Carroll & Graf, $24.95), edited by Janet Hutchings. The theme of award winners and nominees unifies a lineup of writers as varied as Lawrence Block, Ruth Rendell, Andrew Vachss, Anne Perry, and Barbara D'Amato.

They Wrote the Book: Thirteen Women Mystery Writers Tell All (Spinsters Ink, 32 E. First St., #330, Duluth, MN 55802-2002; $12), edited by Helen Windrath, is valuable as a technical manual for prospective writers and informative for fans interested in the contributors' works. Especially worthwhile and funny is Gillian Linscott's piece on research. Other well-known names represented include Val McDermid (" . . . [I]f the eyes are the window of the soul, the mouth is the front door"), Marcia Muller, Abigail Padgett, Ellen Hart, and Barbara Paul.

Pierre Bayard's *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* (New Press, $22.95), translated from the French by Carol Cosman, argues that the murderer in Agatha Christie's famous novel was not who we thought. The psychoanalytic and deconstructionist literary theory will weary some readers, but Bayard's alternate solution is both clever and plausible.

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Art by Darryl Elliott

THE WAITING WOMAN

by Brynn Bonner

"It takes all kinds," her mama used to say. Her mama had meant it as a cause for celebration. Mama would shake her head in wonderment and throw up her hands in complete surrender to serendipity. She had found all kinds of people—their quirks and knacks—an endless fascination. But her mama didn't say things like that anymore, and the woman herself had *never* believed this little cliché explained or excused all of the incomprehensible lumps of stupidity walking around in the world. And it seemed to her—on this June morning—that she had glimpsed a fair number of them as she sat cooling her heels in the doctor's waiting room.

She had been here for forty-seven minutes waiting for the dimwitted little physician's assistant named Jennifer to get the doctor's signature on the form so she could finally be done with this business and be on her way. Jennifer—it sounded more like an evergreen tree than an intelligent being, which was appropriate in this case!

The receptionist called to her, craning her neck over the top of

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the counter, "It shouldn't be much longer. Doctor is in with a patient and has one more after that. Then she can get him to sign. Sorry about the wait."

She didn't sound very sorry. But the woman just smiled the smile she had practiced in front of her bathroom mirror—the saleswoman smile—and said, "Oh, that's okay, Sugar. It's not your fault. I shouldn't have come so near lunchtime. I can wait." *Until they need a Zamboni machine in hell if I have to,* she thought, but held the smile and set her sample case on the floor beside her chair.

She had been waiting a long time to get this thing going. Another few minutes wasn't going to matter. He was so deserving of this, this doctor whose practice had grown so rapidly. She wished her sister could be here with her. She missed her so much.

She adjusted her position in the imitation-leather chair, which seemed to be trying to graft itself to her thigh, and glanced up as the automatic doors gave a little whoosh. A thirty-something, wire-rimmed George Stephanopoulos wannabe entered and strode to the desk, adjusting his hair with one hand as he plopped his Dayplanner onto the counter with the other. "Eleven forty-five; Dr. Lichter; Collier, Allen," he recited briskly.

The receptionist's pudgy fingers flew over the keyboard and returned his volley. "Okay, have a seat, it'll be just a few minutes. Doctor's running a little behind." She was talking to the computer screen rather than to the man. She didn't even do him the courtesy of looking at him when she spoke. The woman watched the girl carefully from over the top of her magazine. She was really more like a machine than a human. What did they call them in all those ridiculous science-fiction movies—cyborgs? It was as if the girl couldn't take in information if it didn't come through that little headset she wore or from her screen display. And yet she got to make all the decisions about who got in and when. A bitter smile spread across the woman's face as she mentally dubbed her the *Determinator!* This helped to confirm a theory the woman had been working through. It was better if things were left to fate. It was dangerous to have someone like this little twit choosing people's fate.

Winner of the 1998 Robert L. Fish Award for her Department of First Stories tale "Clarity," Brynn Bonner is currently working on a full-length mystery novel. The North Carolina author writes under a pseudonym whose spelling, readers with sharp memories may notice, has changed since we first published her. "The Waiting Woman," her second short story, illustrates Ms. Bonner's adroitness at delineating character.

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This poor guy was no match for the machine-girl. He had only his pitiful humanity to cope. The woman was beginning to feel a little sorry for him. It surprised her, because she hadn't felt any human empathy in a long while. But then he destroyed the budding emotion by simply reverting to what he was—a self-important jerk. He drew himself up to his full stature—such as it was—made a *tssk*ing sound as he cocked his head to one side, frowned as if it pained him to have to say it, and said, "Listen, let's not play games. I know what 'running a little behind' means. If I just sit down and wait passively I'll miss a half-day's work. Please let the doctor know that I consider anything over a fifteen-minute wait to be a serious professional breach. My time is valuable, too," he said as he pulled his Dayplanner off the counter and thrust it under his arm.

"Yes, sir," said the girl, still staring at the screen. "We'll get to you as soon as we can." She spoke in the same mechanical voice that, translated out of receptionese, meant *Go take a flying leap!*

She punched a button on her telephone console. "Dr. Lichter's office. May I help you?"

Not likely, thought the woman; this girl was never going to be much help to anybody.

Mr. Dayplanner made a male-agitation display by pacing a few times in front of the counter, then sat down in the corner chair next to a magazine table. He cleared the old issues of *Ladies Home Journal* and *People* from the table, plopping them onto a vacant chair, and spread out his book-of-life. He pulled a tiny cell phone from his jacket pocket and extended the antenna with great fanfare, like a conductor making ready for a grueling rehearsal, and glared a circle around the waiting room.

Okay, thought the waiting woman, *We all got the point. You're a really, really important guy whose time is extremely valuable, and the rest of us are just poor slubs.* She wondered how, in her mama's view of the world, it "took" this kind of arrogant little snot. What contribution was he making? What could he possibly be doing with his life that would warrant this kind of chest-thumping?

He did have a point about the professional breach, she had to give him that. And he didn't know the half of it! But, even with a point to make, a jerk was still a jerk.

A bellow of laughter erupted from across the room. It came from a large black man who was squeezing the shoulders of the smartly attired woman sitting next to him. A sheaf of forms fluttered from the metal clipboard she was handing to a young woman in colorful surgical scrubs. "Yeah," the young woman was saying, "I've known Luisa ever since she joined our volleyball team. And she does, she looks exactly like you!"

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"Yeah, you better believe she does," the man said, still chuckling, "but Clarice here tells everybody they're sisters. She don't like people knowing she's got a twenty-eight-year-old daughter. Then they'll think she's a ol' woman."

"Oh, I do not tell them that," said Mrs. Smartly Dressed, slapping him playfully on the thigh. "I'm proud of my age. I've got a lot of experience behind these wrinkles!"

The waiting woman shifted uneasily in her seat. The sights and sounds coming from these two troubled her. They were so at ease and playful; had such obvious affection for one another. It made her question her plan. She didn't like to question. She felt a little better when she saw that the man's foot was encased in some sort of metal splint and a cane was leaned against the seat of his neighboring chair. It was just a foot injury! He'd be okay. Even Dr. Lichter couldn't screw that up.

But then the volleyball-playing scrub nurse escorted his companion, the smartly dressed Clarice, into the back. She was the patient. The woman looked away, swallowed hard, and stared out the window into the parking lot. It wasn't up to her, she reminded herself.

She caught the blur of blond reflected in the window and felt a surge of irritation. The couple she'd named Truck-Stop Mama and Valley Girl had come sidling in just after she'd gotten here. Both wore high-heeled slide sandals that clopped on the ceramic tiles. Mama's were white and completed an ensemble of skintight jeans, a red blouse with a flounce at the neckline, and enormous hair. She had clicked her gum loudly as she'd waited for the Determinator to pull up her daughter's name on the computer. "Y'all are gonna have to get her through here pretty quick," she'd said, leaning over the counter, straining to see into the back. "She's got a photographer's appointment this afternoon she can't miss."

"We'll do our best," the Determinator had said with no trace of urgency apparent in her voice.

Valley Girl crossed the room, straightening and adjusting an extremely short black sheath dress made of some sort of clinging fabric. She took tiny steps, producing double clopping for the benefit of the assembled waiters. As fashion accessories she wore large hoop earrings, five gold chains of varying lengths, and a sullen expression. She flipped her hair back over her shoulder and stationed herself in the middle row of chairs, where she was quickly joined by Truck-Stop Mama. Each grabbed a fashion magazine. Truck-Stop Mama pinched her thumb and index finger together and wet them with three quick licks, then thumbed the pages of her chosen issue, pointing out items of interest to Valley Girl.

Valley Girl contributed her assessments: "That is so gross, who would wear THAT? THAT is so-o-o-o ugly!" and "Looky here, I

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think that would look great on me; better than it does on her, she's fat, look at her big old butt!" She chained the comments together with a lot of "you knows" and "likes" and punctuated her really earth-shattering observations by picking up whatever strand of her long, unlikely blond hair had strayed to the front and flipping it back over her shoulder, swinging her whole body with the motion.

If she does that one more time, thought the waiting woman, I'm gonna let out a scream that'll have her hair frizzed out like a human dandelion!! Why doesn't she just shut up until she has something worthwhile to say? What was this airhead's place in the world? And what of the mother who had spawned her? She had continued the finger-licking ritual with every other page turn. She looked like a lizard snapping at flies. And other people were going to handle that magazine!

The woman wished her own mama was here right now so she could ask her if she still believed it takes all kinds. Let her get a look at these people and see if she still thought that. But her mama didn't talk much these days. And she didn't seem to see anything as a cause for celebration anymore. Not since Helen had left them. Correction. Not since Helen had been taken from them.

The woman's gaze fell on the White Lady, who got up from her chair and placed a magazine on the corner table, carefully straightening, arranging, and aligning it with those already there and with the two she retrieved from the chair where Mr. Dayplanner had unceremoniously dumped them. She smoothed her white skirt down over her white pantyhose. It was unusual, the waiting woman thought, to see someone dressed *entirely* in white. And telling, in this particular instance. Cold, arctic white.

Even the jewelry was white—a white bead strand, not warm soft pearls, just stark white beads and matching earrings. She carried a white handbag, the kind they call a clutch, which is exactly what the White Lady did to it. She clicked across the room in her two-inch white heels toward the ladies' room, stopping when she got to the door to brush microscopic lint from her white jacket.

As she reached for the knob, the door swung outward and a harried young mother emerged with a toddler in tow. The little guy was in no hurry and seemed delighted to see the White Lady. He smiled at her broadly and reached out to pat her white-skirted knees. She recoiled as if the boy held a poisonous snake, plastering herself against the wall.

The waiting woman watched as the mother muttered apologies and hoved off through the doorway to the adjoining pediatrician's office. The White Lady glared after them and rubbed at her skirt as if to erase the child's touch.

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The woman mentally sniffed. She wished the kid had been armed with a smear of melted Hershey bar. It seemed to her that some people were just here by accident, taking up space in the world, crowding out the good people, the worthy people—people like her sister, so beautiful, so talented, so warm and loving. Was this cold, sterile White Lady the one who was taking up her sister's space? If there was any justice . . . still, it wasn't her choice. Whatever was meant to be would be.

"Well, remind Julia to take her swimsuit and towel, she has swim-team practice at four," the woman sitting in the side row of chairs was saying into her battered cell phone. It featured a strip of duct tape holding some errant part in place, and the user had been leaning her head in unnatural positions to orient the signal.

The waiting woman had tried to avoid looking at this one, but her eye kept roving over. She was a living rebuke to the rest of them who sat in wanton idleness. The woman thought of her as The Doer. She was an attractive woman whose short auburn hair framed an elfin face, devoid of makeup, but fresh and bright courtesy of a good genetic draw. She was dressed in an ethnic-print broom skirt, a simple cotton top, and serious sandals. She carried an enormous straw bag which had produced the materials and tools for a good morning's work. First had come the calculator and checkbook. Ten minutes of punching, clicking, and furious scribbling had produced the satisfied sigh that signified a successful balance. Next had come a giant stack of coupons which got dealt and shuffled with the speed of a Las Vegas blackjack dealer. She constructed an elaborate list on the back of an envelope and allocated the coupons to the pockets of a small accordion-style file and replaced them in the bag. She then made two phone calls: one to schedule a dental appointment and another to order a pair of jeans from a mail-order catalogue that she produced from the bottomless bag.

At this moment she was consulting her planning book and addressing an envelope, presumably for the card she had just written. Unlike Mr. Dayplanner, The Doer's book was dog-eared, with a crop of sticky notes sprouting from the pages. She fished a stamp from an overstuffed front-cover pocket with remarkable efficiency, then snapped the book closed and secured it with a sturdy rubber band. She stretched and smiled at the waiting woman.

The woman wanted to look away, but she smiled back, using the saleswoman's smile again—that way she didn't have to be there for it. *Okay, Mama,* she conceded mentally, *maybe it does take* some *kinds. But still, not ALL kinds.* And besides, everyone had the same chance. It was random. She didn't believe in much anymore, but she believed absolutely in fate. Some people called it *destiny,* but she thought that sounded too majestic. *Divine Inter-*

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vention was also out, she couldn't see anything divine in this life. The *luck of the draw* sounded too optimistic and *pure dumb luck* sounded too pointless. But *FATE, fate* sounded right.

A nurse appeared at the door and swung it open to allow an elderly couple to shuffle through. The man stumbled a bit and the woman struggled to steady him. The nurse seemed not to notice, intent on her clipboard.

The woman bent down to move her sample case further under her chair to clear the pathway to the door. The couple's progress could be measured in inches. Both gray heads were bent in intense concentration, searching for sure footing. The waiting woman uncrossed her legs and pulled her knees in as the man who had been sitting two seats down brushed past her and approached the couple. "Can I give you a hand here?" he asked with just the right tone. No condescension. No pity. No self-congratulations. A sincere, but not oppressively cloying, offer of help. How did he know how to hit just that note? the woman wondered. Her sister had been like that. She'd always known just the right thing to say and how to say it. She had connected so easily and sincerely with people.

The waiting woman had barely noticed the man. His position made it difficult to observe him covertly, and she certainly had no intention of striking up a conversation with any of these people. That would be perverse.

He wore his long blond hair caught back in a ponytail. His T-shirt and jeans were neat and clean and he wore Weejuns with no socks. No tattoo. No piercings. He spoke slowly and softly, unhurried, but not languid. Tan and fit. But not muscle-bound. Definitely not a gym rat. Not an outdoor worker. What then?

The Ponytailed Man called over his shoulder to the desk, "I'll be right back in, Lori, I'm just going to walk these good people to their car."

"Okay, Mark," the Determinator said and actually looked up and smiled. As the woman watched, the smile slid to the right and turned goofy as the girl continued to watch the Ponytailed Man's exit. She was nearly drooling, the woman realized with disgust.

As soon as the automatic doors sighed closed, the Determinator turned to another young woman working over a raft of folders at the vertical file. "Have you seen his band?" she asked in an urgent stage whisper. "They are so hot. He's the bass player. They've been at Rondo's for the past three weeks. I've been four times and I'm going again *to*-night!"

"No," answered the filer distractedly, examining each label as if trying to decipher hieroglyphics. "I haven't been to a club in ages. I had to get new tires for my car and I'm broke."

"Well, see them if you ever get a chance. They call themselves

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the Playwrights. It's a what-do-you-call-it? A pun! Three of them met in a screenplay class at the U, so they want to be playwrights, I guess. But, they also play music and they play it right, get it?"

The waiting woman hated puns. It was just another example of how people didn't say what they really meant. People always played games. And the fact that the girl found this one so clever irritated her immensely. She felt a headache brewing in the back of her skull.

So, he was a musician, and a budding playwright. She looked out through the doors into the parking lot where the Ponytailed Man was helping the elderly man into the passenger seat of the old floating-living-room kind of car favored by old people. The woman was fishing in her handbag for keys, which she snagged just as the Ponytailed Man came around to open the door for her. After what seemed like an eternity and a half she had herself stationed behind the wheel, ready to hurl this two-ton mass of metal down the public roadways—probably with her left ticker permanently welded in the On position, thought the woman. She's got no business driving. Someone should get her off the street. But, then again, maybe it was already taken care of. It's random, she reminded herself, fate would take care of everything.

She resented the Ponytailed Man. He made her uneasy and she didn't like the feeling, that twinge of uncertainty trying to get at her again. She reached down to the handle of the sample case. It felt cool and reassuring. Action was needed—that was all. She had been sitting too long. She walked briskly to the water fountain, bent to take a sip, and then strolled over to the plate-glass window. Little twinges grew into gnawing doubts if you let them. She'd stop it now, get her mind on something else.

The Ponytailed Man came back in, nodded to the receptionist, who positively beamed, and headed toward his self-assigned chair. He smiled at the waiting woman as she returned to her seat, but she adjusted the catch on her necklace, the necklace that had been Helen's, and pretended not to see him.

"Finally," a voice announced from behind the counter. Jennifer, the physician's assistant, was so short her head barely extended beyond the countertop, giving the momentary impression that her disembodied head was actually sitting on the counter, talking. "Doctor has a minute or two if you'd like to see him now," the head was saying as the waiting woman moved toward the counter.

See him! The Waiting Woman most assuredly did NOT wish to see that face ever again. It had taken her weeks to formulate a plan, months to work out the logistics, and almost three years now to implement. The white-hot anger that had set off her scheme had cooled over time to a stone-cold deadness of spirit, sealing

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over any crevices where reason might live. It was almost done, and the woman had neither the will nor the desire to derail anything. There was a slim chance that he might remember her.

She activated the saleswoman smile and spoke to the little twit sweetly. "Oh, that's not necessary, Hon. I can see he's just covered over today. I don't need to take up his time. As long as you've got his John Henry on these releases for me," she said, gesturing toward the forms the girl was stacking on the desktop, "I'm good to go. I'll plan my next visit at a more convenient time. I'll be the rep in this territory for a while, I surely hope. And Marlene tells me he's a good prescriber, so I'll be back often, I'm sure. But today, let me just collect these and I'll leave my little cargo and be out of your hair."

The satchel rested on the countertop, and she twisted the latches into the open position. Reaching in with both hands, she extracted a plastic bag full of small bottles and foil packages. She handed the bag to the girl and busied herself reclosing the latches to control the shaking of her hands.

Her body began to sway and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt beads of sweat forming on her upper lip. The trick was to turn and walk out swiftly and surely. Don't look at them, not any of them. Not Mr. Dayplanner, not Clarice, not Truck-Stop Mama and Valley Girl, not any of them. It wasn't like she was choosing. It was random. She'd seen to that. People needed to know. They had to know about the risks they faced every time this quack whipped out his prescription pad. Helen hadn't known. She had coped before he had supplied her with an easy way out. If only he had taken more time with her, done his JOB! He should have seen. Helen had *managed* before she crossed this man's threshold. As the woman stepped over that same threshold on her way out she repeated to herself like a mantra, *It's random, people have to know,* over and over.

Well, Mama, the waiting woman thought, this will be the test. If it really does "take all kinds" then surely fate will intervene. Maybe Dr. Lichter uses his own samples. Then that would be the end of it. But she hoped, in a way, that it wouldn't happen that way. She wanted him to be humiliated—ruined. She wanted everyone to know what he was. What he had done. What he'd have kept doing if she didn't stop him.

Her hands still trembled as she unlocked the door of the Ford Taurus the pharmaceutical company had furnished for her. By this time tomorrow it would be found in the office lot, and she would be far from here, living her sour life in a new place with her shell of a mother and the spectre of her dead sister for companionship. All her planning was going to pay off, but she wouldn't get to see it for herself. All the months and years of maneuvering to get

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herself into the right position. The hours of tedium as she painstakingly opened, refilled, and reclosed bottles, capsules, and cellophane.

As she pulled from the parking lot onto the surface street, Mr. Dayplanner intruded on her thoughts. He was such a jerk, with his officious manner. She wondered how his wife could put up with that garbage. She frowned. Why had she assumed he was married? A mental picture of the gold band flashing on the hand wielding the Dayplanner swam to the surface of her memory. She pushed the thought out of her mind and shook her head to clear away the image.

A boy of about sixteen crossed in front of her at the first traffic light, his hands thrust into the pockets of his oversized jeans. An unruly ponytail cascaded down his back and he moved to the beat of whatever was playing on the headset snugging his ears. "Can I give you a hand here?" the Ponytailed Man's voice rang in her ears. So what! He was Sir Galahad? It wasn't her choice! She turned the radio up loud.

As she drove out of the city they came to her one by one, like visitations from ghostly accusers. Clarice, The White Lady, The Doer. She pushed them away. It wasn't up to her. Let fate do its job.

She came to a four-way stop and sat there, doing what she did best. She waited. She closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. She wiped her forehead with a tissue and pressed her temples. After a time she fastened her eyes on the intersection and stared hard at the four roadways meeting on this plane, in this time and space. Fate. Then the woman stopped waiting and drove on. O

The Half-Dozen Gang

by Stephen D. Rogers

Number 1 is watching the cameras
Number 2 is monitoring cops
Number 3 is poised in the manhole
Number 4 is on a roof top
Number 5 is revving the engine
Number 6 diverts with a show
The only problem with this plan:
No one is left to go in for the dough

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Desperate Measures

by Mike Munro

Mike Munro is a pseudonym of a Boston writer who publishes most of his longer work under yet another pen name, Grant Michaels; St. Martin's Press has published six mystery novels that bear the name. "Desperate Measures" is the author's first story for *EQMM*. Readers familiar with fan conventions and writers' conferences will enjoy his lampooning of several of such gatherings' recurrent types of attendees. ¶

The white page fluttered in Allya Dorfmeyer's hand. She scowled at her trembling fingers.

What's that? Shaking? Stop it!

She placed the sheet back onto the heavy pile of paper in her lap, then folded her hands calmly on top of it.

This is foolish. I'm not a jittery type, not for anything. The whole thing is pure coincidence.

But in her heart Allya knew the truth. The manuscript she was reading left no doubt, yet she continued arguing with herself.

It can't be. It just can't be.

The manuscript in question was a romance novel submitted by an attendee of the Greenheath Writers' Conference in rural Vermont. As one of the judges, Allya had been assigned to evaluate it—romance was her specialty, after all, and the genre she openly favored. It was common knowledge in the book trade that if a romance novel had any potential, Allya Dorfmeyer would know the best home for it.

It's only a story, so why am I trembling? I'm not delicate, not easily scared.

Allya then realized it was not fear but anger that was troubling her. Two members of the book's sordid love triangle were disquietingly similar to her and her husband.

But why should that bother me?

Once again the obvious answer repeated itself, and once again Allya rejected it. It was coincidence, nothing more. If two of the characters in the story looked and acted exactly like her and her husband, well, it was simply a startling coincidence. Not a fact.

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Wasn't it?

Allya's rational side tried to soothe itself with logic.

When Rikki Manchester wrote this novel, she invented these people, these glamorous, one-dimensional characters living a glamorous life in New York's glamorous publishing business. If the story were true, she'd have shown the tedium of my life, how hard I work, the seventy-hour weeks. She would show how harsh and unyielding New York can become when you live there. And, if Rikki Manchester really knew my husband, if she knew Morrison Henley, the celebrated editor and flop of a lover, she would have written a completely different story.

Allya and her husband did have an enviable life. Both were highly sought publishing professionals in New York, she an author's representative, he an executive editor. Any portrayal of such a life was bound to strike a familiar chord. But the manuscript Allya held in her hands wouldn't submit to such reasoning. In this story the familiarities were eerie. It was as though Allya had been analyzed in molecular detail, even to the three small blemishes on one thigh.

She knows about my moles. Sweet Jesus, my moles! She says it right here. Where is it? Where's that page?

Allya flipped nervously through the heavy sheaf of paper.

There!

She poked at the page with her index finger and spoke the lines aloud.

"Three pale moles lay like a gentle constellation on the inner face of her left thigh, the stars at pleasure's portal."

How could she know that? Who could know such a thing but myself and Morry?

And finally, Allya admitted the awful truth.

Morry is having an affair with this Rikki Manchester, the stinking little chit who wrote this stinking book. And now she's here at Greenheath and I'm supposed to judge the damn thing! If she wants to be published so badly, why didn't she give it to Morry? Or maybe she has, and my dear, darling, literary husband rejected it, as he does anything vaguely romantic.

Rikki Manchester's brief bio said she was a flight attendant based in San Francisco, that her most frequent route was to New York, and that she wanted to be a rich and famous novelist. Allya tried to imagine Morry and the young woman together, but all she could muster was the familiar and ridiculous cartoon that projected itself during her own sexual bouts with the man who was supposed to be her husband. She sighed heavily. It was grotesque, always grotesque.

But in Rikki's version of things, when the philandering husband

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enacted those same fantasies with the ingenue, she relished every moment.

Allya spluttered aloud, *"His Pens!"*

What an obvious, ridiculous title, even for the trash that it is. I could get it published, of course, and make some money at least. But no, I can't, not this thing. It's got to be stopped dead in its tracks. Her career too. A few choice words to the right people and Rikki Manchester's name will be publishing poison. The world is too full of fools like her, all of them wasting precious oxygen. Didn't she bother to find out who was judging this thing? Didn't she realize I'd recognize myself, that I'd protect my privacy? Why would I want the reading public to know about my husband's humiliating sexual needs? And he dares to call it pleasure! What does his analyst say? But I can't hurt him directly. We need each other too much now—our careers, after all—our reputations. I'll get him through the girl. Rikki Manchester will be the messenger of my rage. I'll show Morrison Henley what I'm made of. How dare he talk about me to another woman! How dare he!

Allya threw herself back into the chair's soft cushions. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She knew if she quieted herself awhile that her marvelous calculating logic, born of years as a literary agent, would bring forth a plan. The course of action came quickly and easily, like all the best answers.

I'll eliminate her. Yes. How's that, Morry? Your little sex toy will breathe her last breath of fake vivacity at the very writers' conference where your wife is a judge. Fitting enough?

Allya continued to sit quietly. She must divert suspicion from herself. She might even give the stupid book—*His Pens*—her vote for the first prize. Allya looked at the pile of manuscript and shook her head.

Feckless, undisciplined girl! She didn't even try to camouflage the sources for her characters.

Rikki Manchester had also portrayed another real-life personage who, like Allya, was a guest celebrity at the Greenheath Conference. Doug Cantwell was a rough-and-tumble "man's man" who'd written several bestselling thrillers. For the last few years, though, he'd spent most of his time drinking and screwing and complaining of writer's block. Allya knew that Doug had accepted the conference engagement solely for the money—and for the women—and to hell with the writing business. She wondered whether to show him a few choice excerpts from Rikki's story, where he'd been portrayed as the ingenue's discarded lover. The dimensions and contours of his genitals, along with his hair-trigger response, had not been spared Rikki's venom. How would Doug Cantwell respond to that account of his masculine prowess?

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Probably with violence, maybe even a *crime passionnel.* Allya smiled pleasantly, wickedly.

Perhaps he'll take care of Rikki for me.

Conference rumor buzzed that Doug Cantwell was spending a lot of time in Rikki Manchester's room.

They're bound to suspect him. But if not him, who else?

Allya came up with another suspect who might be blamed for Rikki Manchester's death: Marjorie Starr. With an attic full of completed manuscripts and cartons full of rejections, Marjorie Starr was becoming what the French call an *écrivain manqué.* Though her talent was adequate, she'd got a late start, and time was not on her side. Now in her late fifties, she had to publish soon, if at all.

Pity. Her voice is unique and should be heard. She understands character, language, structure. She is a writer! Not like that vulgar, arrogant bitch. Marge could even change the romance genre, elevate it.

But for now, as far as Allya was concerned, Marjorie Starr was just another potential suspect. The contest was basically between her and Rikki. The judges had already hinted—against the rules, of course—where their votes would be cast. But for a vote or two, Marge could win the conference prize for romance fiction, which was, in a word, publication.

A perfect motive! And if Marge escapes the murder charge, I'll offer to represent her. In fact, I'll take her on no matter what happens. Let her write from a jail cell! Rikki dead and Marge my client. Yes!

Allya nestled into the armchair and enjoyed the rush of imminent success. She'd found two ready-made suspects for the murder she would commit shortly. All that was left was the method. Care, not cleverness, was the key there. Something simple. No violence.

I loathe violence.

A poison, maybe a liquid pesticide, something available at any hardware store. Something anyone could buy. And the means?

Champagne! I'll buy the bitch a bottle of champagne and slip the poison to her that way. Then, while she writhes in agony, I'll tell her everything. She'll know why she died, why I killed her.

Allya looked at the small clock on the table by her chair.

Four P.M.

No time to waste.

She got up and drove to the village center. In the hardware store she went directly to the garden supplies. She scanned the shelves until she found what she sought—a small brown bottle of concentrated pesticide. It was intended for dilution in vast quantities of water. She held the glass bottle up to the light and saw that the heavy liquid was clear. Then she opened it and sniffed. "Per-

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fect," she said softly. It had a sweet smell. The woman at the register warned Allya to be careful, that the stuff was extremely potent.

Like Morry is to Rikki, damn them both!

Her next stop was the village gift shop, where she purchased a set of two hand-blown crystal champagne flutes. Allya noticed a small imperfection in the base of one of them. The sales clerk, who was handsome as a fashion model, claimed he hadn't seen it before—an obvious lie—but he did offer to discount the set for her since there were no others in stock. Allya agreed, then also realized a benefit of the small blemish.

That one for dear, blemished Rikki.

On her way out of the store, someone called out her name.

"Miss Dorfmeyer!"

Allya turned. A young man was approaching her.

"I'm Gregg Holmes," he said. "Remember?"

"Oh," said Allya, "of course." Though she didn't recall him at all.

"Have you had a chance to look at my manuscript?"

Allya smiled cordially. "Remind me," she said.

"Love's Dream After the Fall," said Gregg. "You liked the proposal and said it was exactly the kind of thing you were looking for. I gave you the manuscript the other day, and I'm wondering if you've had a chance—"

"Oh, my dear boy," said Allya, cutting him off. "I haven't had a moment's peace. It's been very hectic here and my plate is much too full. I'm sure you understand."

"But you said—"

"Young man, you are not alone. You must be patient. Almost everyone at this conference hopes I will represent them. I have piles of submissions to take back with me. So I tell you again: patience. You must be patient in this business."

"But you said—"

Allya held up a finger and stopped him. "Just to be safe," she said, "why don't you send another copy of your story to my office. And be sure to remind me in your letter that we met here at the conference. I promise you'll be first on my list."

With that, she turned and walked briskly away, leaving the young man in her wake.

Everyone wants to be a rich and famous writer these days, and now even the men are writing romance!

Allya's last errand in her scheme to eliminate Rikki Manchester was the liquor store, where she bought two bottles of the best champagne they had. She'd had much better stuff in New York, of course, but this would have to do.

Anything that says "champagne" on the label will impress that slut.

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The man at the counter commented on what he saw to be an extravagant purchase.

"Two bottles?" he said. "Must be quite an event."

Allya almost gave up her plan then and there. She wanted no extra attention brought to herself. Instead, though, she remained silent behind her oversized sunglasses and paid cash.

Back in her suite she put one bottle into the small refrigerator to chill. Then she prepared Rikki's death cup. Using a cotton swab, she coated the inside of one champagne glass—the one with the small blemish—with a thin film of the poison. Then she aimed her hair dryer at the glass and set it on low. Ten minutes later the poison was invisible. Only the slightest sweet scent lingered inside the glass.

She'll never notice. She's too coarse.

At ten o'clock, armed with the champagne and the two crystal glasses, Allya set out on her mission. She knew Rikki Manchester was staying in one of the buildings across the campus, a grand old mansion. During the school year it was the home of a literary sorority, but for now it accommodated all the writers at the conference. As Allya opened the front door of the building, she suddenly realized that her plan could go awry at the slightest complication.

I haven't planned this out at all! What if Rikki has company? How will I explain a poisoned glass?

Through Rikki's door, Allya could hear loud music—an incessant driving beat.

Empty, just like her writing.

It was extremely loud, as though Rikki intended to disturb everyone else in the building. Then again, what did she care? She was young, attractive, with plenty of money and time on her hands. If someone else wanted to sleep or work, well too bad. Hooray for me and the hell with you! But then Allya thought:

She's having a party.

She stood outside the door and listened for voices. The loud music made it difficult to hear anything else inside. But as she'd come this far, she couldn't bear turning back. She listened again for voices and heard none, so she decided to risk it.

She knocked. There was no answer, so she banged loudly on the door. Finally Rikki opened it. She stood there, barefoot and clad in a man's oversized cotton shirt, unbuttoned and cinched at the waist with a leather belt. She wore nothing else, and the shirt barely hung to her thighs. As if urged on by the pounding music within, her firm, full breasts heaved and bobbed within the soft cotton of the shirt. Rikki looked surprised, but not embarrassed, as Allya felt she should be, coming to the door dressed—or rather, undressed—like that.

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Allya said, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Rikki ran one hand through long, wavy, bleached hair and answered flatly. "Not yet. But I *am* expecting someone." She didn't seem to care a whit that Allya Dorfmeyer was standing at her door. She was too busy reveling in her body.

"May I come in?" asked Allya.

"But who are you?" said Rikki.

Let me in, damn you, before someone sees me!

"Don't you recognize me?" Allya said calmly.

Rikki looked puzzled. "Aren't you one of the judges?"

Allya nodded. "That's right, and I have good news."

She imagined her husband's naked flesh pressed against Rikki's. She shuddered.

Rikki stared at her coldly and said nothing.

Does she know?

"I've brought champagne to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" Rikki sounded irritated.

"You've won first prize, Rikki. I'm going strictly against the rules, but I thought you'd like to know before the official announcement tomorrow."

Rikki's face brightened slightly. "Well, come in then. I'll get some glasses." She turned and sauntered back into the room.

She could at least feign some interest in winning. Is she so certain of her fame and fortune? Perhaps Doug Cantwell has heard something and told her already.

Allya followed her in and closed the door. "There's no need for glasses," she said. "I've brought you some lovely crystal flutes, as a gift." She graciously presented the box to Rikki, who opened it and took out the glasses.

Does she see the tiny bubble in the base of that one?

Through the pounding music, Allya poured champagne and toasted to Rikki's future. Then it happened. Someone was at the door. Rikki went to answer it, glass in hand. Allya panicked. Was it her date? Perhaps it was Doug Cantwell. And the champagne was already poured into the poisoned glass!

Moments passed.

Then Rikki returned, muttering, "Damn fag!"

"Who was that?" asked Allya, relieved.

"The fairy upstairs. Says the music's too loud and he can't work." Rikki turned the music down just the tiniest bit and grumbled again about finicky gay men, especially the ones who wrote romance fiction.

Allya smiled as though in accord.

"To your future," she said, raising her glass. "And to the women in power who can change the lives of those who seek it."

"Thanks," said Rikki, and emptied her glass in one long gulp.

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Like the pig that she is!

Then Rikki made a sour face. "There's something wrong with this stuff."

Calmly, Allya. Patience. Breathe.

Slowly and quietly, through the ceaseless drumming of music in the air, she explained everything to Rikki, about the book and Morry and her moles. The words caused a crimson flush in Rikki's cheeks.

Is that the poison already, or was that a flicker of regret? Was this all a mistake?

But then Rikki began to rant. "You stupid bitch! You lost your husband long ago. It wasn't just me. He likes party girls, not workaholics."

Suddenly Rikki stumbled.

So soon!

Allya raised her glass and repeated her toast, adding that she was, in this case, the woman in power. "I've poisoned you, Rikki," she said quietly. "You're going to die."

Rikki faltered and slumped against the desk. Her eyes were already glazing over. Allya told her about the champagne and the pesticide. Rikki tried to stand up, but couldn't. Allya removed the glass from Rikki's twitching hand before she could drop it and leave undesirable evidence of the visit. When Rikki fell to the floor from lack of blood to the brain, Allya knew she'd be dead within minutes. But she hadn't counted on Rikki Manchester's already overworked mouth making such a racket during the last moments. To cover up the awful shrieks and groans that were coming from Rikki's throat, Allya turned the music up again, even louder than before. She dumped the rest of the champagne down the toilet and flushed it twice. Then she headed towards the door with the empty bottle and glasses. Rikki Manchester was already gasping. Death rattled in her throat, and she was gone. With great relief, Allya opened the door and walked out quickly.

Welcome back, my dearest darling.

Late the next morning the police had questioned everyone on campus, but with no concrete results. Technically they were stumped. How did the poison get into the victim? They had two suspects: Doug Cantwell, who was known to be "seeing" Ms. Manchester; and Gregg Holmes, who was Ms. Manchester's upstairs neighbor. Mr. Holmes was found crouched over Ms. Manchester's body by Mr. Cantwell when he had arrived for his date. He told the police, "That little fag has been harassing Rikki about her music, and that's probably why he killed her."

But the police were baffled, and Allya was delighted. They had even come up with a suspect she hadn't planned on, the fussy upstairs neighbor. But because they could find no hard evidence

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against either man, the police booked neither Doug Cantwell nor Gregg Holmes.

What wonderful confusion!

That afternoon the judges' panel of the Greenheath Writers' Conference announced their determination by one vote that Marjorie Starr's book, *From the Bottom of My Heart,* had garnered the romance writer's prize, that deliciously coveted guarantee of publication with a hefty promotional budget.

What relief!

For Marjorie had deserved to win, and Allya, regretfully, had cast her vote for Rikki Manchester's book. But she couldn't risk even the slightest opposition toward Rikki, never mind voting down her book. Partly to assuage her guilt, Allya insisted on presenting the award to Marjorie, to which she added her own bonus of a bottle of decent champagne and two fine crystal flutes.

How cunning of me to hand the murder weapon to someone else and have her carry it off!

With the award ceremony over, Allya left quickly and headed for her car, looking forward to a nice, relaxing drive back to New York. She had just opened the door to get in when someone approached her, a good-looking young man. She'd seen him recently, but where?

He smiled at her in a too-familiar way.

"I noticed those champagne glasses you gave to Marjorie Starr," he said. "I like them a lot." Then his smile vanished as he continued, "I think I've seen them before. Did you buy them around here?"

Allya tried to recall where she had met this man, but she couldn't.

"Cat got your tongue?" said the man. "It doesn't matter. I know exactly where those champagne flutes came from, because I was going to buy them myself until I saw that blemish in the base of one of them. Even with a discount, I wouldn't own glassware like that. My friends say I'm too fussy, but I have an eye for detail, Miss Dorfmeyer—which is fortunate in a writer, wouldn't you say? I hate imperfection in any aspect of my life. It drives me *crazy.* It's the same with carelessness, if you catch my drift. I just can't bear it."

Allya eyed him cautiously. She also noticed a group of police milling about nearby. Then she realized that the man standing before her was Gregg Holmes, the other police suspect. A movie screen in Allya's memory replayed a scene from the previous night, when Rikki Manchester went to answer the door holding that crystal champagne flute full of bubbly poison.

Allya's mind raced.

Did he see the glass?

The police seemed to be lingering in the background. Maybe

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their presence was just a coincidence, like all those characters in Rikki's book.

"What do you want?" she said coolly.

"Something very easy for you," he replied. "As of today there's one less romance writer in the world, so now maybe there's a place at the table for me. You know, that same table where *your* plate is always just a little too full."

"You mean . . .?"

"I want you to represent me," said Gregg.

Allya almost gasped. "Well, of course!" she said with a big smile, perhaps too forced. "I fully intended to. You are a very talented writer. And as I told you, you're at the top of my list." She fairly laughed with relief.

"That's good," said Gregg, "because when you cut a six-figure deal for me, maybe I can forget I ever saw that blemished champagne flute in Rikki Manchester's hand last night."

This time Allya did gasp. "Look," she said, switching to her most deeply felt solemnity, "publishing doesn't work that way. I can't promise anything like that. I wish I could, but . . ." She shrugged, as though helpless.

Gregg Holmes shrugged too, and cocked his head. "Well, I need an agent, one I can count on. I thought you might be up for the job. But I guess you'd rather . . ." He turned his head slightly, and once again Allya glanced behind him where the police were standing.

She smiled brightly and chirped, "It's just come to me, and I think I know the perfect place for you. I'll send you my standard contract the moment I get home."

"No need," said Gregg. "I prefer a nice, simple gentleman's agreement. Something like: I say, you do. How does that sound?"

Allya smiled warmly. "Of course," she said. "You young tigers are sometimes a challenge for us stodgy old business minds, but you do seem to have an instinct for how the world turns these days, and that always pays off." She dared a tiny wink at him. "Handsomely, I might add . . . like you. We'll be in touch very soon."

Allya started her car and drove off, waving first at Gregg Holmes, then at the police. She even smiled and nodded as she passed by them. Once on the expressway, she was completely relaxed.

He doesn't want a contract? Perfect! No paper trail. ●

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The Theft of the Parrot's Feather

by Edward D. Hoch

"My fee is thirty-five thousand dollars," Nick Velvet told the young woman seated opposite him. They were alone in the executive lounge at Kennedy Airport, and she kept glancing at her watch.

"I understood it would be thirty," she said. "Is this a new price for the new millennium?" Her name was Jennifer Litener, a short, perky blonde who'd contacted him through an employee at the marina where Nick and Gloria kept their boat during the winter months.

He sipped his beer and smiled at her. "Miss Litener, you want me to fly to the Caribbean an hour from now, board a cruise ship with high security, enter a passenger's locked cabin, and steal a parrot's feather from a locked combination safe in that room. If I can do it, I believe it would be worth that amount."

She let out her breath. "How much down and how much on delivery?"

"Half and half."

"I don't have that much." She reached down to touch the shoulder bag now nestled on her lap. "I only brought fifteen."

"Fifteen, then," Nick told her. "The other twenty on delivery." She dipped her hand into the purse and brought out a tan clasp envelope. "Tell me something, Miss Litener, why is this feather so valuable to you?"

Fans of Edward D. Hoch's Nick Velvet will be able to find some of the best of the series collected in a recently released volume from Crippen & Landru Publishers (P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505). Entitled *The Velvet Touch,* the anthology of fourteen stories, including all eight of those featuring the White Queen, is planned for release around the same time this issue arrives at newsstands. ¶

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"I was told you didn't ask questions."

Nick shrugged. "I can ask. You don't need to answer. Do you have the necessary information for me?"

She patted the envelope. "It's all in here, his photo and itinerary along with the down payment and the key card you requested. Do you know how you're going to do it?"

"Leave that to me."

"You can't just steal his key card or use this one. Neptune Lines photographs all the passengers when they board before sailing. The photos are stored on a disk. Any time a passenger returns to the ship from a shore excursion he must insert his magnetic key card in a slot. That brings up his photograph on a screen for inspection."

Nick smiled at her. "I don't think that will be a problem. But how do you know he'll get off the ship in Grenada?"

"He gets off at every port. He loves to find exotic things to bring home."

"One more question. Does he have a favorite number combination for the safes in the staterooms?"

"I've only traveled with him a couple of times. There's no favorite number, but he needs four digits. When I was with him he used the latitude or longitude of the place we were at."

He stood up and shook hands with her, then placed the envelope in his briefcase. "I should be back in two days. I'll phone you."

"Good luck, Mr. Velvet."

It was nearly a decade since Nick and Gloria had been on a Caribbean cruise, and he felt odd flying off to Grenada without her. He'd phoned from the airport just before boarding the plane, explaining that he wouldn't really be cruising because he'd be on and off the ship before it left port. Once settled into his first-class window seat, he opened the envelope from his client, flipped quickly through the banded packets of hundred-dollar bills, and withdrew the photograph of Jan Janson. He seemed to be a tall man, perhaps a bit older than Nick, with a high forehead, squinty eyes, and a firm jaw. He was blond, reflecting his Swedish nationality, and as if to compensate for the receding hairline he'd grown his sideburns long. Nick sighed and slipped the photo back in its envelope.

Next he took out the cruise itinerary and studied it. The *Neptune Flier* had left San Juan on Saturday evening for a week-long cruise, carrying some 2,000 passengers and a crew of 900. Its first stop on Monday had been at the island of Aruba off the Venezuelan coast. Today, Tuesday, should have been a stop at Venezuela itself, with a bus tour of Caracas, but that had been canceled due to the recent disastrous flooding in the area. Instead they were at

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sea, bound for Grenada the following day. That was where Nick was to intercept and board the ship.

The only other things in the envelope were the plastic key card for the *Neptune Flier,* with a color photo of the ship on it, and a diagram of the ship's floor plan, on which cabin number 348 had been circled in red. They were souvenirs from a previous voyage, and the mysterious Miss Litener had cleared the card's magnetic strip so that it now held no information. She'd admitted traveling with Janson a couple of times in the past, perhaps on one of his feather-gathering expeditions. Nick never ceased to wonder at the strange assortment of objects people paid him to steal.

He had to change to a smaller plane on the way to Grenada, but he landed on schedule at Pearls Airport and rented a car. The harbor area where the cruise ships anchored was across the island and he drove over the mountain road with care. A small two-story hotel with pink awnings on its windows afforded him lodging for the night. His room faced the harbor area, and his first surprise came on Wednesday morning when he awakened at seven to find the *Neptune Flier* anchored a couple of miles off shore. Obviously the harbor was not deep enough to accommodate the larger cruise ships at its docks. The passengers would be coming ashore in motor launches.

Nick spent the next hour in the bathroom, with Jan Janson's photograph propped beside the mirror. He carefully bleached his dark hair to the proper shade of blond and then shaved off the hair at the top of his forehead until it approximated Janson's hairline. Then he bleached two adhesive hairpieces from his makeup kit and trimmed them into passable sideburns. There was nothing he could do to duplicate the man's squinty eyes, but sunglasses should solve that problem.

For the moment the blond sideburns remained in a plastic bag in his pocket, along with a black wig he'd be using later. The sunglasses were out of sight too. He wore a camera around his neck, in tourist fashion, with a baseball cap concealing his hair. He checked himself one last time in the mirror and set off for the dock where the launches would discharge their passengers. The man he sought was not on the first launch from the *Neptune Flier* and Nick grabbed himself a bit of breakfast at an outdoor café while he waited for the next one. Meanwhile, another cruise ship had dropped anchor and he could see preparations being made for more shore excursions. The parade of launches from the *Neptune Flier* arrived at intervals of about fifteen minutes. When Janson wasn't aboard the second one, Nick started strolling up the crescent-shaped road that ran along the harbor. Souvenir shops lined its far side and he went into one, glancing over a row of stuffed parrots before purchasing one. Outside the shop, he pulled out a few

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tail feathers and dropped the rest of the bird in a trash barrel. The feathers might come in handy later on.

He saw that the next launch from the *Neptune Flier* was just pulling into the dock. Even at that distance he recognized Janson from the photograph. Strolling back toward the dock, Nick managed to pass quite close to the tall man. He tugged the baseball cap a bit further over his eyes, bent over, and said, "Hey mister! You dropped this."

Jan Janson stared at Nick holding out the key card with the magnetic strip on the back. He slipped his hand into his left pants pocket and felt around. "No, mine's right here," he said with a decided accent.

Nick gave him a smile. "Must have been someone else. I'll turn it in on the launch."

They started off in opposite directions, but Nick managed to trip on a raised portion of sidewalk and had to grab onto Janson to steady himself. The Swede pulled away. "What's the matter with you?"

"Sorry. I tripped."

He hurried on, the man's key card now hidden in his hand. The useless one was now in Janson's left pocket. It would delay him a while longer when he returned to the ship. At the dock Nick stopped in the restroom and tossed away the baseball cap. He affixed the blond sideburns to his cheeks and covered his eyes with the sunglasses. Comparing his reflection to the photo of the Swede, he could see that the jaw line was wrong, but otherwise he might pass a quick inspection.

As the motor launch pulled in, unloaded its tourists, and prepared for the return trip, Nick managed to be one of the first aboard. There was always the chance that Janson might decide to return immediately to the ship, but the odds were against that. If he was seriously looking for things to buy, he'd want at least an hour or two on shore, especially since the better-quality shops were located away from the harbor. As it turned out, Nick had the launch virtually to himself. "You're returning early," a crewman commented.

"Feeling a bit under the weather," Nick explained.

As the boat drew closer to the ship, the *Neptune Flier* grew larger in Nick's view until it towered over him like the floating hotel that it was, blotting out all else. He hurried quickly up the gangway and inserted his magnetic card in the machine. A crewman glanced casually at the screen and said nothing. Nick made his way through the three-story atrium that served as the ship's lobby. He went up a flight to the casino, closed while the ship was in port, walked through it, and made his way along a narrow corridor to stateroom 348.

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The key card worked perfectly and the door opened at a turn of the knob. If Nick heard the faint sound behind him, he had no chance to react before a brutal lunge knocked him off balance and sent him sprawling to the stateroom floor. The door swung shut as his assailant landed on his back, driving his face into the carpet. A voice close to his ear said, "This is from Conrad."

Then Nick saw the knife pass before his eyes and knew he was fighting for his life. He bit down on the man's wrist and was rewarded with a cry of pain. The weight on his back shifted just enough so he could give a mighty heave and free his left arm. He pushed against the carpet and they both rolled over with Nick on top. He broke free and turned to face his attacker for the first time. The man was shorter and younger than Nick and appeared to be Malaysian, like much of the crew. He'd lost the knife when they rolled over. Now he made a grab for it on the carpet between them, but Nick was faster.

"Who's Conrad?" he asked, brandishing the knife. "What do you want?"

"He paid me to do this," the man replied, obviously frightened. He had no reason to believe that Nick would not kill him on the spot.

"What else? What were you to do after I was dead?"

The question seemed to baffle the man. He was trying to come up with an answer that might save his life, but he seemed unable to think clearly. "I wasn't supposed to kill you," he said finally, "just cut you as a warning."

"What is your name?"

"Gracha."

"I'm not the man you're looking for. My name is Nicholas. Where do you work?"

"In the kitchens."

"Get out of here," Nick ordered with a wave of the knife. "If you try it again, I'll kill you." He could afford to be generous. Jan Janson was the target, not Nick Velvet. When he left the stateroom, he would no longer be Janson.

The Malaysian slithered quickly across the floor, afraid to rise until he reached the door. Then he was gone without looking back. Nick breathed easier. The man obviously had been waiting for his return, lurking somewhere in the corridor. He opened the door and glanced outside. There was no one in sight, but the door opposite him led to a service closet. He opened it and saw shelves of bed linen and bathroom supplies. This was where Gracha had lain in wait.

Back in stateroom 348, he went directly to the closet. The combination safe was similar to the type found in better hotel rooms. The digital readout indicated it was locked at the moment, and a

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standard keypad allowed a four-number combination to be entered. That meant ten thousand possible combinations. Even if he'd had time to try them all, these safes were equipped with an anti-theft mechanism that allowed only three wrong guesses before the mechanism was frozen in the locked position for thirty minutes.

He remembered what his client had told him about the combinations the Swede liked to use. Latitude or longitude. He took a notebook from his pocket and checked the official latitude for Grenada: 12:07 north. He punched in 1-2-0-7 and tried to turn the handle.

Nothing happened. The safe stayed locked and the letters *ERR* for error appeared on the digital readout.

Longitude: 61:40 west. He punched in 6-1-4-0 and tried again.

The safe was still locked.

Remembering that the safety lock allowed only three tries before the system froze, Nick began to sweat. He stood up and walked over to the window, trying to steady his hands. Had he done something wrong? He checked the numbers in his notebook. Grenada—

Of course! He'd made a stupid error! If the parrot feather was in the safe, Janson couldn't have acquired it in Grenada because he hadn't yet returned to the ship. And the only prior stop had been in Aruba. It was Aruba's latitude, or longitude, that he'd used for the combination.

But which one? Nick had only one guess left.

He consulted his notebook again. Aruba was latitude 12:30 north, longitude 69:58 west. He shrugged and tried 1-2-3-0, then turned the handle. The safe rumbled as the bolts pulled back and the door swung open to a lighted interior. Nick was relieved but not especially surprised. If luck weren't running his way, the man named Gracha would have cut him with the first swipe of his knife.

The only thing in the safe was a plain white envelope, unsealed. Inside it was a single feather about eight inches long, bluish-green but with a touch of yellow at its bottom. It could have been from a parrot. For thirty-five thousand dollars, Nick was prepared to swear it was from a parrot.

He placed the envelope carefully inside his shirt, locked the safe, and stepped quickly into the tiny bathroom. The sideburns came off in an instant and he covered the bleached hair with the black wig from his pocket. He barely noticed a jar of face cream on the shelf above the sink. Then he returned to the stateroom door and opened it.

A woman with wavy brown hair stood holding a .22 automatic pointed at his nose. "Step back inside, please," she ordered. "It's a small weapon but it makes a big hole."

Nick was sure he'd never seen her before. He decided to listen to her story before attempting to disarm her. He stepped backward

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into the stateroom and she closed the door behind her. "I think you're making a mistake," he told her.

"Where is Jan?"

"I have no idea who you're talking about. I entered the wrong stateroom by mistake."

She held the weapon steady. "Your key card wouldn't open this door."

"Try it yourself." He moved his right hand a fraction on an inch toward a pocket.

"Freeze or I'll blow a hole in you!"

Nick remembered the jar of face cream in the bathroom. Jan Janson wasn't traveling alone. "Suppose we talk this over," he said, knowing the Swede might return at any time. "Is this your stateroom too?"

"Damn right it is!"

"Are you Jan's wife?"

"Just a friend."

"One who carries her own weapon? No man would ever own a gun that small."

She waved him to the bed and he sat on its edge. "I came back from the beauty parlor and thought I heard a sound in here. I knew it was too soon for Jan to be back, so I took this out of my purse. Anything can happen on these big ships."

Nick managed a feeble grin. "If you think I stole something, you can search me. I just want to get out of here and back to my room."

"What's your name? What number is your stateroom?"

"It's Nicholas and I'm in two forty-eight."

"This is three forty-eight."

Nick shrugged. "I'm on the wrong deck. I knew as soon as I entered that this wasn't my room. Come outside and I'll prove to you that my key opens your door."

"Go ahead, Mr. Nicholas," she told him. As they left the stateroom she dropped the pistol into her purse and closed the door behind him, making sure it was locked.

Nick slipped Janson's key card into the slot and turned the knob. The door opened. "I told you so!"

"That should be reported to ship's security."

"Good idea. Let me buy you a drink and then we'll go find someone."

"No, thanks. I'm expecting Jan back soon." It was the answer he'd expected.

"All right, perhaps another time. Nice to have met you, Miss—"

"Bradley." She was back in the room before he could say anything else.

Nick lingered in the atrium until he was sure the woman would

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not reappear. Then he headed for the elevator that would carry him down to the next motor launch. The doors were sliding open to admit him when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder. "Could you show me some identification, sir?" an authoritative voice asked with a slight accent, possibly German.

The man was tall and graying, with a tan deep enough to indicate a good deal of sun time. He was dressed in brown slacks and a yellow T-shirt from Aruba. The hand that wasn't on Nick's shoulder held a ship's security ID with the man's photo and the name Frederick Ende. "Have I done anything wrong?"

"Just a few questions. Your identification?"

Nick showed him a passport in the name of Nicholas, hoping it wouldn't be compared with the passenger list. "Please explain this."

"Gladly," Frederick Ende said. "I observed you with a young woman named Tina Bradley just now in the corridor outside her room."

"Miss Bradley, yes."

"Do you know her well?"

"I had some business with her husband."

"She's not married. She is, in fact, a high-priced call girl out of Miami, working the Caribbean cruise ships."

"Oh?"

"I trust you haven't made use of her services."

"Of course not!" Nick told him, sounding indignant. "I'm sure you must be mistaken."

"If you'll step down this corridor to the security office I'll show you some pictures." Nick went along, beginning to fear he'd never get off the *Neptune Flier*. The ship's security office was a stateroom just off the atrium lobby, equipped with desks and filing cabinets. It connected to an adjoining cabin where he could see the flicker of television monitors. Ende flipped open a file and picked up a photograph. It was a picture of Janson, apparently taken by a security camera. "Do you know this man?"

"No," Nick answered truthfully.

"He's a Swedish businessman named Jan Janson. The Bradley woman is his traveling companion." He uncovered another photograph. "On a previous voyage aboard this ship he traveled with another woman." This time the security camera had captured Janson in the company of Nick's client, Jennifer Litener. "She's also believed to be a prostitute."

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked the security man.

"Just a friendly warning. These are shady characters, up to no good. You should stay away from them."

"Are they running a con game?"

"Perhaps."

There was a knock at the door and a short bald man with a

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black moustache stuck his head in. "Will you be free soon?" he asked. As he spoke, his gold tooth caught the light.

Ende nodded. "Five minutes."

When the door closed, Nick asked, "Who's that?"

"Our casino manager, Mr. Conrad."

"Conrad?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I've heard the name."

"All right," Ende said, getting to his feet. "I guess that's all. I just wanted to warn you."

"I appreciate it," Nick told him. They shook hands and he left, heading once more for the elevator. He saw Ende going off toward the casino.

This time what stopped Nick was a glimpse of Tina Bradley seated alone in the atrium cocktail lounge. Did he owe her a warning about Conrad? If she was merely a paid companion, she probably couldn't care less what happened to her Swedish friend. Still, it was just one o'clock, and with luck he had a little time before Janson returned to the ship.

"Hello there," he greeted her. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"What? Oh, it's you again. I'm just waiting for Jan to get back. I don't need another drink."

He sat down anyway. "It's none of my business, and I certainly don't owe you anything after you stuck a gun in my face, but I thought you should know that your friend Janson is in big trouble with the casino manager."

Her face jerked toward him. "What are you talking about?"

"I just overheard a conversation, that's all I can say."

"A conversation with Felix Conrad, that gold-toothed bastard?"

"If that's his name, yes."

She swore under her breath and took out a cigarette. "I should never have gotten into this."

"Perhaps I can help."

"I'll work it out."

Nick decided to get in a little deeper. "Do you know a woman named Jennifer Litener?"

"Damn! I knew it! You're working with Jenny, aren't you? I knew your story was a phony!"

"I just want to know what's going on."

She lit the cigarette and took a long drag on it. "Jan is into something shady. Jenny used to travel with him on these trips but they had a falling-out and he hired me instead."

"To do what?"

She shrugged. "Just travel with him. He figures a couple looks less suspicious than a middle-aged man alone on a cruise. I didn't

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argue. I enjoy the sun." She finished her drink and met his eyes. "Now it's your turn. What were you doing in our stateroom?"

"Jennifer wanted something from him."

"The birds aren't here. They're coming later."

Suddenly it was all clear to Nick. "Parrots. Rare parrots."

"Sure, that's all he deals in. A hundred birds at five hundred dollars each is fifty thousand dollars."

"He gets them from Aruba?"

"His contact is there. Jan is just the middleman. He brings back proof that the birds are valuable and the man in New York pays him. The birds are put to sleep and flown up inside a shipment of native baskets."

"What sort of proof?"

"I guess they can tell from a feather if it's a valuable bird, healthy with good coloring. Some people like parrots as pets because they live so long. Rare ones can bring big bucks."

"What about Conrad?"

"Jan lost big at baccarat on Sunday. He promised to cover his losses with money from this bird deal after we get back, but I guess that didn't satisfy Conrad. I'm sure he doesn't mean to kill Jan, though. He probably just wants to frighten him. You don't collect gambling debts from dead men."

Nick took a breath and stood up. "All right. Do me a favor and forget you saw me."

She smiled. "That would be hard to do. I've got some time right now if you'd like to show me your stateroom."

"Thanks for the offer. Maybe another time."

Nick hurried to the elevator once more, but this time he was stopped by a sudden memory. When he removed the feather from Janson's safe he'd forgotten to substitute a feather from the stuffed bird he'd purchased. It wasn't crucial, but the false feather might delay discovery of the theft, perhaps even until the man got back to the States. If Janson hadn't yet returned to the ship, he still had time to pay a return visit to the stateroom.

It took him no more than a minute to retrace his route through the darkened casino and down the corridor to stateroom 348. He inserted the key card and turned the knob on the door. The room was silent as he entered, and it wasn't until he heard the low sound of gasping that he realized he was not alone.

Jan Janson had returned from Grenada and he was on the floor between the bed and the wall, bleeding from a deep chest wound. Nick dropped to his knees but he could already see the man was sinking fast. "Janson," he said, "Who did this?"

Blood was welling into the dying man's mouth. *"Slut,"* he answered. *"Slut!"* Then his eyes glazed over and he was gone.

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At that point Nick had only two options. He could call security and report the body, or he could leave the ship and get as far away as possible. Since he wasn't about to get involved in a murder investigation, he chose the latter. If Tina Bradley, the only slut he'd encountered on the ship, had killed Jan Janson, it certainly didn't concern him.

He left the stateroom quickly and cut through the casino again on his way to the elevators. He hardly noticed the bald man behind the darkened bar until he spoke. "Mr. Nicholas?"

"That's me," Nick replied, because he could hardly deny it.

The man smiled, and even in the dim light his gold tooth was visible. "I'm Felix Conrad. I manage the casino. If you came to gamble, we're not open till we reach international waters."

"I know that. I'm just cutting through."

"You were pointed out to me earlier by Mr. Gracha."

"A member of the kitchen staff, if I remember correctly. We ran into each other."

"He mistook you for someone else."

"Jan Janson. I was in his room by mistake."

"Gracha meant you no harm. Your hair looked blond to him then."

Nick smiled slightly. "A trick of lighting, no doubt. I believe Janson is back on board now, if Gracha still has a message for him."

Conrad ignored the remark. "We'll be open this evening if you wish to try your luck."

"I might do that."

"We accept all currency, even feathers."

Nick's eyes narrowed as he studied the man. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't believe you were in Mr. Janson's stateroom by mistake, Mr. Nicholas. My rate of exchange is as good as you will find elsewhere."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

The bald man grinned. "Very well. If you should change your mind, you know where to find me."

At last, far later than he'd planned, Nick took the elevator down to the embarkation level. The motor launch had just pulled in with returning passengers. He waited until they'd boarded the ship and then started down the gangway. "Hold up there!" a voice shouted behind him. "Further shore trips have been canceled for now."

"What's the trouble?" Nick asked the ship's officer who'd issued the order.

"Nothing alarming," he said. "There's been a death on board and the local police have been summoned. We trust things will quickly return to normal."

But until they did, Nick was trapped on board the *Neptune Flier.*

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The security man, Frederick Ende, met him as he stepped off the elevator. "Sorry to inconvenience you, sir, but the local police told us no one should leave the ship. It's routine whenever there's a suspicious death."

"Who died?" Nick asked innocently.

"Mr. Janson, the man we were talking about earlier. The steward found him dead in his stateroom. The steward hadn't noticed his return, and had gone in to check the towels."

"A heart attack?"

Ende shook his head. "A chest wound, either a knife or a small-caliber pistol."

"When did he return from shore?"

"I have no idea. That's one of the things we're trying to establish."

The local police, when they arrived later, seemed reluctant to take on the case. There was talk of the ship being in international waters, though it was clearly in the harbor area. Ende rounded up Tina Bradley, Felix Conrad, and Nick for questioning together, and escorted them to the dead man's stateroom. The chief of detectives was waiting there, seated on the bed. He was a retired British army officer named Squires, a firm-jawed man whose rugged face reminded Nick a little of the Swedish film actor Max Von Sydow. And that reminded him of those Ingmar Bergman films Gloria used to insist on seeing.

It was Ende who spoke first. "Mr. Conrad, I've asked you to join us because there are rumors around the ship that the murdered man lost a great deal of money at your baccarat table when we were at sea on Sunday."

The bald man flashed his gold tooth in a weak smile. "Those things don't concern me. This is only Wednesday. He had until our Saturday morning docking to settle up."

"You didn't hire a crew member to threaten him?"

"Certainly not."

"Or kill him?"

The casino manager stopped smiling. "You're making a very serious accusation with no evidence at all."

The security man turned his attention to Tina Bradley. Perhaps he sensed that the British detective, Squires, wanted as little role as possible in the proceedings. "Miss Bradley, you were sharing a room with Mr. Janson on the cruise. Exactly what was your relationship?"

"I was a paid companion," she answered calmly.

"The Miami Beach police have faxed me a copy of your arrest record. There are three prostitution arrests at luxury hotels where you worked as a call girl."

"The charges were dismissed in each case. If you have my record, you know that."

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"The hotels didn't want the bad publicity. Is that when you switched to cruise ships?" When she didn't answer, he asked, "Where were you two hours ago, at precisely one-oh-five?"

"Let me think."

Nick answered for her. "She was with me in the atrium cocktail lounge. I remember checking the time. Why does it matter?"

"That's when Janson returned to the ship. He was stopped at the gangway because the magnetic strip on his key card had been wiped clean. But one of the crew members identified him and he was allowed on board."

"I never saw him," she insisted, and Nick confirmed it.

"I was watching for him too," he said, "He must have taken the elevator directly to his cabin."

The security man turned to peer at him. "Then what about you, Mr. Nicholas? Funny, I can't even find your name on the passenger list."

Nick showed his key card. "I'm in room two forty-eight. Your list must be mistaken." He realized that his luck was beginning to run out. He had only one thing to offer, Janson's dying message, and it wouldn't be enough because he'd been alone with the man at the time. There were no witnesses.

He needed something else, and fast.

Ende flipped through the passenger list. "Room two forty-eight is registered to a Mr. and Mrs. Oldorf. I met them the first day out. They look nothing like you."

"Wait a minute," Nick said. It had come to him in a flash. "Jan Janson returned to the ship at one-oh-five and was allowed on board even though his magnetic card had been wiped clean. At that time I was seated in the lounge with Miss Bradley."

"Yes?" Squires asked. "What is your point?"

Nick turned to the British detective. "If Janson went directly from the launch to his room, how did he open the door? Ende just told us they allowed him on board because one of the crew recognized him. But he still had the useless key card that would open nothing."

"Tina must have had a key," Ende answered, a bit too quickly. "She was sharing the room with him."

"But I was with her from one o'clock on," Nick reminded him. "As soon as I left her I went almost directly to Janson's room and found him dying."

"You found him and didn't report it?" Squires asked.

"That's right. And it tells me who killed him, even if you only have my word for it. If Janson arrived on board without a room key, where is the first place he'd have to go? Someone had to open his door, and he didn't see Tina. The room steward says he never saw him either. That only left one possibility. Janson went to the security office, and he saw you, Mr. Ende. You escorted him to his

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room and unlocked the door. By this time you'd heard about the valuable feather from Conrad and you wanted it for yourself. You and Janson fought and you killed him, perhaps accidentally."

Ende was on his feet then. "You'd better be able to prove that!"

"When I asked Janson who did it, he answered, 'Slut.' He wasn't talking about Miss Bradley, his traveling companion—"

"I hope not!" she interjected.

"—but in his dying moment he'd reverted to his native tongue. *Slut* is a word sometimes found at the finish of Swedish films. It means, simply, *End.*"

"If he said that, he was just thinking about the end of his life," the security man protested. "What sort of evidence is that for a jury?"

"Do you have any other explanation as to how he got into this room?"

"All right, I brought him up and unlocked the door," Ende admitted, "but nothing else."

Squires had taken out his notebook and pen. His face hardened as he said, "I think you'd better write down exactly what happened, Mr. Ende." Then, to Nick, "You will remain on board, sir. I'll get to you next."

Felix Conrad left the stateroom with him, walking just behind Tina. "For a price I can get you off the ship," he told Nick.

"What's the price?"

"The parrot feather. I know you have it."

"You're wrong."

The casino manager shrugged. "Then stay."

It was an hour later when Tina brought him word that Ende had made a full statement to the British detective, confessing that he'd accidentally stabbed Janson during a struggle. That was the news he'd been hoping for, but if Ende's statement contained anything about smuggled birds and parrot feathers he didn't want to stay around and be subjected to a search. He found Conrad and agreed to the offer. After all, he still had the feathers from the stuffed parrot he'd purchased on shore.

These seemed to satisfy Conrad and as the day drifted into evening he arranged for his man Gracha to take Nick ashore in one of the motor launches.

By the next day, Nick was back at Kennedy Airport, handing Jennifer Litener the envelope containing the parrot's feather. "Did you have any trouble?" she asked.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," he said with a smile. Then he added, "I hope you'll find good homes for those birds."

His words startled her, but then she relaxed. "At these prices, they'll be living in luxury." ✪

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Art by Allen Davis

A Lazy Woman

by Peter Turnbull

The man knew the woman was dead. As soon as he saw her he knew she was dead. Lying there at the edge of the wood, half on and half off the track, propped up against a tree. Eyes open, mouth open, massive bruising about her neck. Overweight, he noticed; she would in life have considered herself overweight and be worried about her waistline. She was clothed in white, all white, virginal white: white blouse, white slacks, white socks, and dainty white shoes. All in white when she died. Dead, all right. Very dead. No need to hurry, no help needed here, he thought, no medical assistance required, not now, not for her. He turned and walked away, to the clear relief of his dog, he noted. Though no stranger to the death of animals, the dog seemed upset at the death of a human; it had crouched and shied away, and had been reluctant to approach the deceased woman in white.

The man walked down the forest track between thickly standing pine woods and returned to his cottage. He opened the gate. His wife was in the garden, hanging up the washing on two lines, one on either side of the garden path. She looked at him quizzically but

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didn't question his early return and he, for his part, noticed for the first time how strongly developed her forearms had become after twenty years of housework. Other than that, he didn't acknowledge her. It had become like that between them. They had stopped speaking to each other some years ago and had just gotten on with their jobs: he on the hill, she in the house; and even in bed at night there seemed to be a sheet of steel plate between them. He walked into his cottage, into the hallway, which smelled strongly of wood polish, and picked up the ancient telephone. In the garden, with clothes pegs in her mouth, his wife heard snippets of the conversation; ". . . aye . . . dead, aye . . . a woman . . . Hemmings . . . I'm the forester. . . . Ye come down the A74 from Glasgow and turn off at Lesmahagow, follow the signs to Lanark, ye'll see a Forestry Commission track off to your left, turn up it and you'll come to my cottage. . . . Aye, I'll no go anywhere . . . I'll wait."

He replaced the phone and walked into the kitchen and made himself a mug of tea. He didn't offer to make his wife one. It had also come to be like that between them. Thirty minutes later, he walked out of the house and stood at the gate. He contemplated the weather as his dog settled at his feet. Pleasant for July, he thought, pleasant for the city folk, but the forest needed rain, the trees were thirsty. He fretted for his trees and wished he could give them water. He also worried about fire; they were dry enough for him to be worried about fire. The forest had been planted with wide fire breaks, but even so, a forest fire is still a terrible sight and the loss of timber costly. He surveyed the sky, blue, blue, blue . . . not a cloud, nice for the city dwellers. He heard the high-pitched whine of a car engine moving uphill in first gear and then the white shape of Papa Delta Foxtrot turned the bend.

The man raised his hand and stepped out of the gate as the car slowed to a halt. He saw two police officers in the vehicle.

"Mr. Hemmings?" Sergeant Piper got out of the car.

"Aye," the man nodded, "I'm Hemmings."

"You reported a dead body."

"Aye."

In the future it may be only in short stories that readers will encounter the engaging cops of Peter Turnbull's P-Division. The hard-edged cases of the fictional Glasgow police department were inspired by the author's years as a social worker in that city. Mr. Turnbull is long since retired from social work and resettled in his native Yorkshire. We asked him when to expect the next book; he told us there'd likely be no more in this series. †

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Piper noted Hemmings to be a tall, well-built man, stout boots and tweeds which he thought must be uncomfortable in this heat. Piper's eyes fell on Hemmings's dog, a black Labrador, who too must, he thought, be uncomfortable in the sun. Piper's own dog was black, and in the summer months he and his wife ensured she was exercised only after dusk. PC Wanless approached and the Labrador began to growl.

"Shaddup!" Hemmings kicked his dog with the side of his foot. "Aye, up the track." Hemmings turned and began to walk up the track in a slow, methodical way, a policeman's pace when walking the beat; in this manner a man, whether policeman or forester, could cover a large distance and expend only minimal energy—both professions know the need to conserve energy because they never know when they're going to have to call upon their reserves. The pace, Piper found, also made the heat more bearable. Hemmings walked in silence, his dog keeping between him and the police officers. Hemmings turned a bend in the track and stopped and didn't raise an arm but nodded, in a lazy manner which somehow annoyed Piper, indicating that the police officers should look farther up the track. They did so.

"I see her," Sergeant Piper said.

"I'll be at the cottage if ye want me." Hemmings turned and walked back down the track.

Piper and Wanless continued up the track; each had his mind on the job in hand, yet each, without expressing it, found time in their thoughts to reflect that, despite the corpse towards which they walked, it was indeed pleasant to be out of the city, especially on a day like today, warm, cloudless sky, and the smell of pine. It was a pleasant change from common stairs in the housing scheme smelling of stale urine and glue. They approached the body and the two cops in crisp white shirts and serge trousers saw, as Hemmings had reported, that the corpse was an adult of the female sex, and with open mouth and eyes, and bruising about the neck, sitting up against a tree amid a swarm of flies it did, indeed, appear to be deceased. Piper grasped the radio attached to his shirt collar and pressed the Send button. "Sergeant Piper, Control."

"Control," a female voice crackled, sounding loud in the forest, the silence of which was broken only by the constant buzzing of the flies.

"CID assistance requested at this locale, confirm apparent corpse."

"Control. Understood. Out."

The man began to drink. It was eleven A.M. The bars were opening. He was in the town. He went into a bar and began to drink.

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And he began to smile. It was not, though, as an observer might assume, a smile of contentment, nor was it a smile of pleasure; it was not even a smile of malice. It was a smile which comes with release, a smile which comes as a weight slides off one's shoulders. Sitting there on a stool at the bar, he knew he faced a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment, but he wasn't worried, he had never been one to wriggle out of things, he had paid penalties and accepted punishments without complaint since he was a child. Now the ultimate penalty had to be paid. How ironic, he thought, how ironic, that with the prospect of many years behind bars ahead of him he could only feel a sense of freedom: of release.

Dr. Chan knelt by the body of the woman, by now cordoned off with blue and white police tape tied to trees and strung across the track. He then stood and walked away from the corpse, bending low under the tape, and joined Richard King.

"Well, a formality, but death is confirmed." Chan wiped his brow. He was never comfortable in the heat.

"Thank you, sir." DC King nodded. He was a chubby, bearded CID officer, well mature for his twenty-five years of life. "How long would you say she has been dead?"

"Off the record, since last night. The pathologist might be able to be more accurate. But also nonmedical means would support that estimate; this is Forestry Commission land and not much frequented by the public, but even so I can't see this lady being here in this exposed position for more than twenty-four hours without being noticed. Also, she hasn't been savaged by foxes, another night out here and the foxes would have their pounds of flesh. Quite literally. I think she was probably dumped here during the night after being killed elsewhere. Her shoes and clothing are not what you'd expect her to wear if she walked the forest, and also there's no sign of a struggle. But she's dead, probably by strangulation, and so you may remove her."

"Again, thanks." DC King turned and beckoned two constables to approach. One carried a body bag.

King returned to Hemmings's cottage. He walked up to the front door between two parallel lines of washing. The front door was open, left open deliberately, King assumed, to allow the stone building to ventilate. King, too, like Wanless and Piper, found time to reflect on the pleasant change that comes from being in the country, but he found the heat relentless. At least in the city there is shade. He tapped on the door and stood back. A dog barked, a man's voice yelled "shaddup," and the dog yelped. A woman came to the door, mid forties, King thought. He also thought that she looked hard-bitten by life.

"Police." King smiled. "Is Mr. Hemmings in?"

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"Aye." The woman retreated into the gloom and the cool of the cottage.

King waited. A cuckoo sang. Insects flew. Hemmings loomed out of the darkness and stood in the doorway, squarely so. He fixed King with an expressionless stare. King realised that he wasn't going to be invited into the house.

"Mr. Hemmings?"

"Aye."

King also realised that he was going to have to work uphill in this interview, his initial impression being that Hemmings was monosyllabic, verging on speechless. "I understand you found the body?"

"Aye."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Aye."

"Well, what did happen?"

"I found the body then phoned you."

"I see." King paused. "Can you offer any useful information?"

"I don't know."

"Sorry?"

"Only you'll know if it is useful."

"Accepted."

"She was dumped there at two A.M. this morning."

"How do you know?"

"I heard a motor. A van drove past the cottage and up the track. It woke me up. I looked at the clock, it read two A.M. Cars and that don't often drive as far up as the cottage. It's three miles from the road."

"I noticed."

"So the vehicle drove past at two A.M. It woke me and set off the dog. I noticed the clock. Two A.M. Walked up the track this morning to see why the van had driven up there. Now I know."

"Two A.M." King repeated.

The man ordered a meal in the next bar he visited. He chose chili, rice, and pita bread. He'd heard that in prison meals are bland and repetitive. So he had a chili; he thought he'd have a spicy meal before he walked to the police station. After he had eaten, he visited the toilets and when washing his hands he looked in the mirror. He saw a middle-aged man: a round face, spectacles, balding, short, neatly cut greying hair. He saw a silk shirt and an expensive suit. He knew that if he should smile he'd see gold in his teeth. But only if he smiled. He now no longer felt like smiling. Now a great enormity was dawning on him. He decided to walk to the police station at Charing Cross, calling in at a bar or two along the way. He thought of his house . . . he could ask his

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brother to keep an eye on it. Maybe the best thing to do would be to sell it and take his possessions into storage? And the business, that was gone, all that work he'd put in to build it up and now he'd lose it. But imagine . . . imagine being married to your mother-in-law.

"Two A.M.," King repeated. "You didn't leave the house?"

"No reason to."

"So you didn't see the van?"

"Silver Mercedes."

King raised his eyebrows.

"Heard it coming back down the track a few minutes later. Saw the driver, middle-aged guy, spectacles, clean-shaven, round face. Enough light to see that this time of year at two A.M."

"I see."

"Had writing on the side of the van, Holyman Mercedes Benz Dealer."

King smiled.

The man, a little drunk, entered a bar and levered himself onto a stool. He wondered that he hadn't seen it sooner and was so, so pleased that they had had no children. Perhaps he didn't see it because he had thrown himself into the dealership, building it up and working sixty, seventy hours a week and coming home too tired to notice anything. But now he knew why she had been so keen for her mother to move in with them so soon after they married. Indecently soon. He had two drinks in that bar and then left.

Richard King drove back to Glasgow. He parked his car in the car park at the rear of P Division police station at Charing Cross and entered the building by the rear Staff Only car park. He signed in, said "Hi" to Elka Willems, who was on duty at the uniform bar, and went up the stairs to the CID corridor and sat at his desk. He wrote up the interview with Hemmings in the file on the as-yet-unnamed murder victim and then reached for the yellow pages and looked up Holyman in the Motor Dealership section. Holyman's showrooms were on Great Western Road hard by North Woodside Road, near to the church which King recalled had the thinnest steeple of all the churches in Scotland. The distance between Charing Cross and Great Western Road at the junction with North Woodside Road was not at all an impossible walk, quite a pleasant stroll, King thought, along Woodlands Road or along St. George's Road. He chose the Woodlands Road route, more trees, more shade. It took him fifteen minutes.

He entered the Mercedes Benz dealership; sleek, gleaming machines stood on linoleum, surrounded by potted plants. Even

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the tires of the cars shone as though they had been polished in some way. A young man sitting at a desk snapped to attention as King approached. "Can I help you, sir?"

Oh, I wish, I wish. King smiled, thinking of his own battered ten-year-old mass-produced heap. "Yes, you can, but not in the way you or I would like."

"Oh?"

"Police." King flashed his ID. "I'm looking for Mr. Holyman."

"He phoned to say he wouldn't be in today."

"I see. What sort of car does he drive?"

"Why . . . well, a 300 SEL saloon. A silver one. German racing silver. He thought it appropriate, you see."

"I see. It wasn't his preferred colour?"

"No. Mr. Holyman envied the customers who chose dark colours for their motor cars, black, dark blue . . ."

"I see. What colour is yours?"

"Yellow."

"You own one!" King was surprised that such a young man could be the owner of a Mercedes Benz.

"Yes. That's it." The man pointed to a die-cast child's toy on his desk. "I fancy that that's the only Mercedes Benz I'll ever own."

Richard King enjoyed the young man's good humour. "So, how did Mr. Holyman sound when he phoned this morning."

"Agitated. He also sounded drunk, which is not like him. He tends to be workaholic not alcoholic."

"Really?"

"But more agitated than drunk; his speech was slurred, not like him at all. Confess I gave it a wee thought, you know. Wondered if all was well with him."

The man gripped the beer glass in the way he used to hold beer glasses when he was in the army, a meaty clasp with his fingers and his palm, noticeably different from the more delicate civilian method of using fingertips to hold beer glasses, and drank deeply. At first he had thought it was because his wife had been upset by the death of her mother, keeling over like she had done with a massive heart attack, quite literally dead before she hit the ground. So he had allowed the mess, the buildup of the dust, the accumulation of unwashed dishes, the lack of clean laundry. He even came to do the housework himself. He didn't mind. His wife was depressed; she'd been close to her mother. But after six months, there had been no change, and it occurred to him that his wife did not, after all, seem upset about her bereavement. She wasn't depressed at all. It was then, a week or so ago, that the awful truth had dawned. It had taken some time to dawn because by then they had long been sleeping in separate rooms: The magic,

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he knew, had left their relationship very early in the piece. Often he had felt more married to his dealership than to his wife.

He thought about prison. He thought of the noise. He had heard about the noise. The jangling of keys, the clanging of cell doors, but worse, much worse, the primal screaming of the deranged prisoners rending the night.

Detective Inspector Fabian Donoghue sat at his desk and glanced up Sauchiehall Street, tall angular buildings either side of the thoroughfare which drove in a straight line towards the summit of the hill at Queen Street and so linked to the city's grid system. The street baked in the midday sun. His phone rang. Imperiously he let it ring twice and then picked it up. "Donoghue."

"Switchboard, sir," said a crisp female voice. "Dr. Reynolds from the Royal Infirmary for you."

"Thank you."

The line clicked.

"Hello . . . Reynolds here." He had a soft voice.

"Yes, good afternoon."

"Is it . . . so it is, twelve o'clock just gone. I'll be able to have lunch on time, for once. I've concluded the P.M. on the female corpse that was brought in this morning. I understand that Mr. King is the interested CID officer."

"Yes. I'm aware of the case. Mr. King is out on it at the moment."

"Well, I'll fax a copy of my report to you, but the gist of it is, as thought, she was strangled."

"Strangled?"

"Yes, but somewhat unusually there was no sign of a struggle, no skin tissue or blood or hair under her fingernails, no defensive injury such as a broken fingernail. I looked for traces of barbiturates or alcohol, which might indicate that she was comatose or at least sleeping when she was attacked, despite her open eyes, but I could find nothing. It was as if she let herself be strangled. Puzzling."

"As you say, but it was murder by strangulation?"

"Yes. Which is a crime associated with emotion. People don't strangle total strangers. I've heard about the Thuggee sect in ancient India, but as a rule, here in the West, at the millennium, people do not strangle total strangers. They just don't. Strangulation is a method of murder associated with hate. Somebody hated this woman."

The man walked down Sauchiehall Street. He enjoyed the pleasing dulling of reality caused by the alcohol. It had, he thought, been an accumulation of things.

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It had been the meal they had had together in a fish restaurant, the way she had smeared ketchup all over her piece of fish and ate it, then, putting the knife and fork down and using her hands, ate the chips one at a time, dipping each one into the great pool of ketchup on her plate. And taking her time, it not apparently occurring to her how rude it was to keep others waiting while she finished her meal. Fully half an hour after he had finished his meal she placed her knife and fork on the plate and said, "I've finished." Never before had she eaten like that, but seldom before had she eaten without her mother's presence and never without her influence.

It had been the way she poured sugar into her coffee, straight from the bag, not using a spoon, and pouring far too much sugar for the mug of coffee to absorb.

It had been the chocolate stains he had found on the carpet of her bedroom, trodden into the pile, and the large number of empty soda bottles under her bed.

It had been the way she walked behind him. No matter how slowly he walked, she always walked behind him, as if content to be led on an invisible lead.

It was her alarm clock, noticed to be set for 10:30, by which time he would have done two and a half hours at the dealership.

The man saw the police station at the bottom of Sauchiehall Street, just the other side of the motorway. Just one more bar, he thought, just another drink. Or two.

"What's his home address?"

"I don't know if I should tell you."

"This is a serious police investigation."

"Maybe I should phone him?"

"If you like, but I doubt there's anyone at home."

A few moments later the young car salesman with a yellow toy model of a Mercedes Benz on his desk said, "You're right, no answer," and then gave Richard King an address in Bearsden.

The man leaned against the bar and helped himself to a handful of peanuts from the complimentary dish. Maybe he should have divorced her, maybe he shouldn't have. It was the cheating that had sent him into a cold rage, the sustained cheating by two women . . . all the while it had been his mother-in-law that had kept his house, prepared his meals, and she had done this as well as keeping her daughter in check. Upon her death the sham was exposed. He realised then, he'd been married to a lazy woman, and she and her mother had cheated him of twenty years of marriage.

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"Do you know something?" The man tried to focus on the young man in a red shirt who stood behind the bar.

"What's that, sir?"

"Do you know that there's two things a woman can't do that a man can do?"

"What are they, sir?"

"A woman can't go into a bar by herself and a woman can't be lazy. A man can go into a bar by himself, like me here, just now, and a man can be lazy. You can make a joke of a lazy man, you can make him a comic figure for the cartoons, but a woman can't be lazy. Even other women hate lazy women." He drained his glass.

"Never considered that before, sir. Can I get you another drink?" The man had no more room for beer, so he ordered a whisky. Then he said to make it a double because it would be his last drink for some time.

The house was a bungalow set back from the road. A silver Mercedes Benz stood on the gravel drive. King rang the doorbell and waited. There was no answer. That didn't surprise him, just as the house didn't surprise him. A man with a Mercedes Benz dealership just had to have a large bungalow in Bearsden.

The man slid off the seat and dropped some notes and coins on the bar and nodded to the young man in the red shirt. "For you," he said.

The man walked out of the bar and into Sauchiehall Street. He focused his eyes on the police station. He thought about the murder, last night, in their home, about midnight. Even as his hands clasped around her neck she just lay there, blinking, as if she wondered when he was going to stop . . . even then . . . no reaction, no struggle . . . nothing. Nothing at all.

Richard King returned to P Division police station. There was nothing he could do now until Richard Holyman surfaced, which King knew he would at some point. As he drove he thought of his wife and their son. Rosemary had wanted shelves put up in the kitchen for some months now. She never nagged him, never mentioned them, but looked at the wood wistfully when she was in the kitchen and knew that he was looking at her, telling him in her quiet Quaker way that she thought the wood had lain there long enough and should now be made into shelves, as he had promised. He would put them up for her that evening. ●

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Lead and Leather

by K. j. a. Wishnia

The brighter the sun, the darker the shadows. At noon on the equator, the sun beats straight down. Objects cast no shadows.

—All right, I'm lying. I'm actually a little over 150 miles south of the equator, and there's really no such thing as not casting a shadow. And besides, at noontime, any sane person is indoors out of the sun, which will burn you to a crisp in fifteen minutes at this latitude. Right now I'm sipping through two long straws on the nectar of a young, green coconut that three minutes before had its top chopped off by a young boy with a machete, his brown skin glistening blindingly from sweat and sun.

I'm down on the beaches of Salinas, on the Santa Elena peninsula of my native Ecuador, escaping the gathering North American winter and recovering from an ordeal that has left me pale, weak, angry, frustrated, disoriented, and also got me kicked off the NYPD.

My recently invalidated police credentials were enough to get me a tour around one of the proud warships of the Ecuadorian armada. The seamen eagerly took me around the decks, to the engine room, the game room, everywhere except a few restricted areas, even covering the bridge, where, when no one was looking, I snuck a peek at the Emergency Broadcast Codes and saw that three dashes is a Distress Call, three dots repeated four times means Man Overboard, and four dots repeated three times means Get Back Home, The Government Just Fell. I wonder if the U.S. Navy bothers about having this last one.

I spend the day alternately basking in the sun and staying out

K.j.a. Wishnia's first novel, *23 Shades of Black,* was nominated for both the Edgar Allan Poe and the Anthony Award in the category of Best First Novel. What made the nominations especially noteworthy was that the book then existed only in a small-press edition. Since then, Mr. Wishnia has gone on to publish two new novels with Dutton/Signet: *Soft Money* (May/Signet paperback) and *The Glass Factory* (June/Dutton hardcover). ✝

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of the sun, since my skin, once used to this climate, has spent far too many years chasing muggers and rapists through dark, fetid corridors. I need to get back into this gradually. And think about what I'm going to do for a job now.

I watch the sun set behind the towering luxury hotels while gently sidestroking through the body-warm waters of the Pacific Ocean, dry off under the low-hanging canopy of a wind-blown palm tree, then set out for a barefoot stroll along the sands in no particular direction.

I've been on vacation two full days when I get called back to duty.

It's still early, about nine in the evening, when my stroll takes me off the sands and up the unpaved *malecón,* where I can see a disturbance on the horizon like scavenging insects overrunning a piece of fallen flesh. I don't realize how right I am.

I'm the first cop to arrive at the scene (all right, ex-cop, but it's only been a couple of weeks). The murmuring onlookers let me through when I flash the laminated ID card I was carrying in the inner pouch of my one-piece. I must be something of a freak for these people. Most men in the world have yet to accept the idea of a woman cop; South American men are still further behind that; and when you add on to it that I'm still dressed for the beach—! Well, get used to it.

Whatever combination of the above elements it is, something makes the crowd spread with the recognition of some kind of authority on my part. I walk through the human passageway, feeling very much aware of my semi-nakedness, and there, face-down—fortunately for the squeamish—is what remains of a man who looks to have fallen at least fourteen stories from one of the balconies of the facing hotel, judging from the impact damage. He is fully clothed, heavy-set, with mostly grey hair on his balding head, and is clutching something in his right hand.

I kneel down to get a closer look, ignoring the roving eyes of some of the young *marineros* who are peeping with aroused interest, and I don't mean at the dead man. The object clenched in the dead man's right hand is a small package, about the size of half a standard brick, wrapped in plain white paper and what looks like electrical tape. I lift it out of the dead man's hand—it's too soon after death to have to pry it loose, it comes free easily enough—and it weighs a ton, by which I mean at least twenty pounds. It must be solid lead.

The beach-resort cops will only screw this up. I carry the lead weight inside the lobby of the hotel and flash my ID at the desk attendant.

"'Detective Filomena Buscarsela of the New York City Police Department?" he says, as if somehow the NYPD heard about this

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tragedy and beamed me straight here at the speed of light, which must explain the unorthodox uniform I'm wearing.

"Call the police, will you?" I say.

"I already have."

"Good. What room was this man staying in?"

"Fifteen-oh-two."

Oh. Good guess.

"Take me up there."

"I can't leave the desk."

"Then I'm going up myself. Okay?"

I start towards the elevator. No one stops me.

I'm beginning to feel a chill—damn this air conditioning!—as I step out onto the cold tile of the fifteenth floor, but I've walked about a mile along the beach, and it's a little too late to go back and change. I pound with an experienced fist on the door of room 1502 and wait. Some feet scuffle over to the door, and someone looks at me through the peephole.

A woman's voice asks, *"¿Esta sola?"*

"Yes, I'm alone."

Eventually the door opens, and there stands a starlet. I mean, she's not exactly what I pictured the balding man's roommate to look like, but then, what do I know? Five years on the police force and I still walk into a potential crime scene armed with three ounces of wet nylon clinging to my body. Oh, I do have the lead weight with me, but it's not exactly an ideal weapon, either.

Anyway, the starlet: I won't bore you with picturesque descriptions, since she's just another sexy woman in a negligee who smells of alcohol greeting me in a hotel doorway, but basically most guys I know would chew one of their arms off to be in my position right now. She's also wearing leather gloves, a leather choker, a leather G-string, and a leather something I'd rather not mention that speaks of quite a night of it here in room 1502.

Make that both arms.

Her eyes flit up and down the corridor to verify that I'm alone. She looks distressed, but not like she just lost her husband or her lover or something.

"You saw?" she says.

"No, I didn't see." Something tells me to go for the Bad Cop angle first.

"You dropped this," I tell her, holding out the lump of lead. Its weight makes my biceps bulge, such as they are.

She looks at it and gets this confused look in her teary eyes. Eyes that look more than a little bit gone.

"Can I come in?" I say, and go official this time, presenting the ID and translating what it says into Spanish for her.

"I can read English," she tells me, slurring it a bit.

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I figured as much. Any high-class whore anywhere in the world has to know some English.

"Won't you come in, Officer Buscarsela?" she says, stepping unsteadily away from the door.

I follow her in. A quick look around and the tale is already halfway told. The rug is all bunched up; there are three unfinished glasses of champagne and four—that's four—empty bottles of champagne standing and lying on a low glass coffee table, and a fifth one started. That's not at all bad among three people. But the kicker is revealed upon closer observation of the surface of the glass table, where a few prismatic crystals seize hold of the light and loudly betray the hastily cleaned-up traces of that ever-present white compound. Oh, not this again. Five years ago, when I first started, whoever we apprehended almost always had some pills, mostly reds or 75-cent 'ludes (I'm really dating myself here) or a joint or two. Coke was for the rich. Lately, it seems that every damn crime isn't a crime unless there's a few thousand dollars' worth of cocaine attached to it. Frankly, it's starting to annoy me.

"What'd you do with the rest?" I say, looking up at her. She sways a bit closer, but doesn't answer. I go on: "Look, the police are going to be here in a few minutes—bad as they are, drug deaths kind of get them hopping—and you're likely to get a fairer shake from me. So spill it, sister." Still nothing. "All right, we'll start slowly: Whose glass is that?"

Stare. Pause. All of a sudden someone knocks the chocks out from under her and she collapses into a whimpering heap on the thick white shag rug, shuddering like a little lost sheep. I'll leave out all the sobs and dramatic pauses for the purpose of coherency:

"I can't tell you," she says. "They'll kill me, too."

"Who'll kill you?"

"We were having a little party—"

"Yeah. I can see that," I say. "Who'll kill you?"

"Who do you think? They came for their money. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. He thought if he got them drunk they'd forget about it. But not these boys. They drank and drank and then they held him down and punched him. He spat on them, so they dragged him over to the balcony. They were just trying to frighten him by holding him over the edge, but he was so drunk he wriggled away from them and he—he lost his grip and went—"

Here she breaks down into another fit of sobs and the like.

"How much of a start do they have?"

"What?" she asks.

"How long ago did they leave?"

"Oh. Only a couple of minutes."

"Where's the phone?"

She points to an end table. I call the desk and tell them to shut

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the hotel and tell the cops to seal off the block and search the building. Then I walk back over to her.

"What is this?" I ask, holding out the taped-up lead weight.

"They were—they were hitting him with it."

Oh. I set it on the table next to the three glasses. There's blood on my hand. I wipe it off with a napkin.

"Where's the fourth glass?" I ask.

Her sudden, confused look convinces me that she really has no idea what I'm talking about. Then she gets it.

"Bodyguards don't drink on duty."

"Oh, yes." Of course. "Well, you just tell that to the police when they get here," I say, "just like you told me now, and I'm sure everything will be all right."

She stares up at me almost with a look of gratitude. I tell her maybe she'd better go clean herself up before the police get here. She nods vigorously and practically hops to her feet, disappears into one of the other rooms, presumably to carry out my suggestion.

I watch her go, then run the tip of my finger through the most prominent gathering of crystalline remains; convinced that it's not cyanide, at least, I put it to my tongue. An icy anaesthetic bitterness spreads across it. I spit the stuff out. But the bitterness remains.

I could wash it down with champagne.

—Just kidding. And yet . . . I look closer. All three glasses have that slight misting of freshly poured champagne. I feel them. They're ice cold. This is the tropics: Things warm up pretty quickly around here. The open bottle is cold, barely touched. The others are warm. Maybe there weren't two other people here.

I get up and wander around the hotel room a bit. There is the usual evidence of extravagant debauch. Four and a half bottles of twenty-five dollar champagne gone, and more in the refrigerator. I expect there's more coke around somewhere, too. I check the icebox, the vegetable bin, some more of the usual places that amateurs choose to hide their stash.

My wandering takes me out to the balcony. A fresh breeze is blowing in off the Pacific. I breathe deeply of it. Mmmm. It would be so invigorating were it not for the crowd gathered around the body plastered to the blackening sidewalk fifteen floors below. The police are finally arriving. I can see the car with the red beacons on top rolling down the unpaved road that fronts the beach. The beacons are not flashing. They probably don't work.

Get with it, Filomena! You've been up North in the richest country on earth for so long you've actually forgotten how different things are down here. I shake my head at my own spoiled-rottenness, and me, a native daughter, gone *gringo* like so many others. No, Ecuador is not like the U.S. Rich white kids who get

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busted for a few grams of coke in New York are out on $200 bail the next morning, and all they get for their pains is a year on probation. That's why they tend to hide their coke in places like the refrigerator.

But this is a different country, different society, different laws. Coke is no joke here. You get caught with it, it's five to fifteen years in a South American prison. (For those of you who cut class in eighth grade, Devil's Island was a French prison off the coast of South America—and the Spanish guards aren't as nice.) And if you want to buy your way out, you better have enough for the five cops who respond and their friends, the deputies and their friends, the police chief and his friends—in short, it takes a lot.

So people down here have to be a lot more creative, a lot more daring, if they plan to store any quantities of drugs on the premises. And it's slowly coming back to me that if possible, they'd rather store the stuff off the premises.

The police car down below has stopped and is disgorging its uniformed passengers out onto the dirt. Some of them circle around the body, others head up the steps into the hotel.

I go back inside and reexamine the strange leaden package. The black electrical tape doesn't wrap completely around. Several strands are exposed and sticky, all facing the same way, as if the weight had been taped to something. Maybe two days in the sun has deadened my brain, or maybe I just don't think like a cop when I'm wearing a nearly translucent monokini instead of a uniform.

But now I'm thinking, for a change. I kneel down on the balcony, squeeze my arm between the loose rattling aluminum rails that I wouldn't want to bet my life against, that certainly don't look like anyone as big as the dead man could have gone over them easily—through them, maybe, but not over them—and start feeling along the underside of the balcony. I extract my arm and shift my legs forward and thrust my arm through another set three rails down. Nothing. I shift once more, this time reaching the north corner of the balcony, and there, taped out of sight, is a package. I grab ahold of it and yank. It comes free easily enough. I pull it back through the narrow railings.

The package I'm now holding in my right hand is identical in appearance to the one I'm holding in my left hand. Only this new one weighs about half an ounce. I chew a corner off, and the pharmaceutical taste of cocaine numbs my tongue.

The elevator doors open, and several booted feet start looking around for room 1502, while I'm putting it together: The dead man's arms were much too thick to go through the railings the way mine did. To get at the package he would have had to climb over the railing and hang down with one hand, reach for the package with the other hand, and toss it over the railing before climb-

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ing back inside. Get a guy the kind of drunk he'd get on three or more bottles of champagne, send him over this railing holding on with one hand, and have him grab a tiny package that, quite surprisingly, weighs about six hundred times what's expected, and you've got yourself a neat little death. And when the drug angle is brought to light, which it would inevitably be after the requisite blood test on the deceased, the full-of-alcohol-and-cocaine angle would only strengthen her "I-tried-to-stop-him-but-he-wouldn't-listen-to-reason" plea. Very neat indeed. From up here, that is. Fifteen floors below, it's not so neat as all that.

There's a strong-armed knock at the door. The starlet, minus the leather this time, bounds like a mountain doe over to the door, looking like a million, and opens the door wide for the dark-skinned mestizo police officers outside. She begins to go into her act, and I cut it short by tossing the lead weight onto the glass table: It shatters the tabletop into a thousand hopeless fragments. All eyes turn towards me.

"Sorry," I say to the woman. "But those two packages are so much alike I just couldn't tell the difference between them."

She looks at me with eyes that are begging me to disappear from her life, right now and forever. No such luck.

"You got some working handcuffs in a size eight?" I say, approaching the bewildered sergeant, handing him a half-ounce of cocaine with my defunct ID. "Where I come from, that's what we do with murderers." ●

"Stop bugging me, Mother. It's too late to save my marriage!"

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PIKER'S SILENCE

by Keith Miles

Alan Piker was not like the other offenders. He was polite and intelligent. He looked clean, well groomed, and healthy. There was none of the prison stink about him. He had a self-respect that amounted almost to dignity, a rare sight in a maximum-security institution like Winsen Green. Piker didn't seem to belong behind bars at all. The others in the class were all old lags, hopeless recidivists who had spent most of their adult lives in and out of prison. They were beyond redemption. Piker was certainly not. Unlike the others, he had a future. Only some grotesque mistake could have pitched him into the company of such men.

Keith Miles is better known by the pseudonym Edward Marston, which he employs for two series of historical novels: the Nicholas Bracewell Elizabethan theater mysteries and the Domesday Book tales, set during the Norman conquest. In 1996, Mr. Marston's novel *The Roaring Boy* received a nomination for the Edgar Allan Poe Award. His first story for *EQMM* is set in a prison in which he himself taught drama in the '60s.

Colin Richmond enjoyed his weekly chess class at Winsen Green. When he had been asked to take it on, he was not quite sure what to expect, eager to help yet uncertain how best to do it. He soon found his feet. Only five prisoners joined him for his Monday evening session and four of them did so simply to get out of cells they occupied for well over twenty hours a day. Loomis, Slattery, Triggs, and Megson were more interested in a token freedom than in the game of chess. That was what set Piker apart from them. He had a genuine flair for the game, a desire to learn its mysteries, to improve his game and, by extension, himself.

Early on, Colin played with each of them in turn, moving from one table to another, giving each of his competitors time to consider their next move before he returned to them. The method was not a success. Loomis made up his mind quickly then complained noisily while Colin was shifting a pawn on another board. Triggs,

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by contrast, the oldest and slowest of them, took ages to reach a decision. The quick-witted Slattery was a talkative little Irishman with an ingratiating smile while his cellmate, Megson, a cadaverous individual with paper-white skin, was willing but ponderous. Piker could beat all four of them with ease.

Regular partnerships soon developed. Colin set the hulking Loomis against the diminutive Slattery. They played three games to every one fought out in slow motion between the head-scratching Triggs and the deathly Megson. With those pairings sorted out, Colin Richmond was free to concentrate on Piker. The man fascinated him. Apart from being the youngest of the group—he was still in his twenties—Piker was the only nonsmoker. The other four regularly and patiently rolled their own flimsy cigarettes. Slattery would split a matchstick vertically into quarters with a needle then use one section to light his cigarette before igniting those of his friends. Nothing was wasted.

The most striking thing about Alan Piker was his silence. It was like a shell into which he withdrew, a deep, meditative, impregnable silence that isolated him completely from the humiliation of his situation. He might have been playing chess in the comfort of his own home. Colin was mesmerised. There was no physical contact with the man and barely more than a glance was exchanged between them, yet he was somehow drawn ever closer to him. He shut out the constant banter of the others. Piker's silence was overwhelming. As Colin studied the man's handsome but impassive face, his admiration slowly grew. It was almost as if the silence had a strange erotic dimension.

What was Piker *doing* in prison? Colin had been warned not to discuss the men's crimes with them. He was there to teach them to play chess, not to act as an unpaid solicitor. This did not stop the prisoners trying to bend his ear, of course, to win his sympathy or to boast about their criminal records. Loomis was a common thief with thirty years of larceny behind him. Slattery was a crooked car dealer, Megson was serving a sentence for fraud, and Triggs, the toothless and apparently benign old man, was a compulsive arsonist. What of Alan Piker? He did not have the look of a thief, the patter of a car dealer, or the wild urges of a fire-raiser. Why on earth was he there? Colin could not work it out.

As another session came to an end, he gathered up the chess sets and thanked the men for coming. They took their leave in the usual way. Loomis told him yet again that his appeal would soon come up, even though it was patently a lie. Slattery always had some obscene joke to pass on by way of a farewell. The lugubrious Megson tried to cadge a small gift off Colin—a pencil, a newspaper, even a paper clip—and Triggs would sing an incongruous lullaby in a quavering voice. Piker remained silent. He ignored

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the others and they left him alone. He was secure in his own private world. Colin Richmond was sorry to leave him.

"He almost beat me this evening, Jean," he admitted frankly.

"Who did?"

"Piker. Alan Piker."

"You always talk about him when you get back from the prison."

"He's the most interesting of them."

"Maybe," said his wife, serving the meal, "but he's still a criminal. They don't lock them away in prison for nothing."

"Actually, they do," retorted Colin, airily, five weeks of teaching chess having made him an expert on the penal system. "British justice is an imperfect instrument. Look at the Birmingham Six. They started off in Winsen Green. And remember the Guildford Four. They were innocent as well. So were the Bridgewater Three. They all had to be released in the end. And there have been dozens of other unsafe convictions."

"The police usually get it right."

"That's a matter of opinion, Jean."

Colin Richmond was in a garrulous mood. It was always the same when he returned from his chess class. Imprisoned with the others for two long hours, he celebrated his escape in a gushing stream of words. The meal was almost over before she could bring him to a halt. Jean Richmond was a loving and devoted wife but even her tolerance was being put under strain.

"Do you think we could change the subject, Colin?" she said.

He was hurt. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to hear any more about prison while I'm eating. It puts me off my food."

"But this class is important to me, Jean."

"I know that."

"So why can't I tell you about it?"

"You already have, Colin. For the last half an hour at least. And there's so much else for us to discuss. The children, for a start. Could you pick David up from the cinema?"

"What's he doing at the cinema?" asked Colin, bridling slightly.

"What do teenagers normally do at the cinema?" she teased. "He's watching a film with his pals. One of those Star Wars epics."

"Why can't you fetch him?"

"Because I have to drive over to Kidderminster to get Emily."

"Kidderminster?"

"Tamsin's party."

"Is that on this evening? Wouldn't it be more convenient to have it at the weekend? Nobody has a party on a Monday night."

"Tamsin does. And Emily was invited. Of course," she added

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with a smile, "if you'd prefer to drive to Kidderminster, then I can pick David up from the cinema."

"No, no," he said, irritably. "I'll get him."

"He *is* your son, Colin."

"I'm not likely to forget that, am I?"

"You are when you've been playing chess in that prison. All you can think about while you're there is this Alan Piker. To hear you go on about him, anybody would think that *he* was your son—not David."

The remark was lighthearted but it struck Colin with the force of a slap. He was sobered. Perhaps his wife had stumbled on the secret of his affinity with Piker. The man appealed to his paternal streak. Though he was barely fifteen years older than the prisoner, Colin felt curiously protective towards him, a father coming to the defence of an erring son. At least, that was how he tried to explain to himself the growing affection he had for Alan Piker. What he could not tell Jean was that he sensed that the affection was mutual. When they sat together, bonded by silence, linked by moving pieces on a chessboard, Colin Richmond shared something deeper than a conventional relationship between teacher and pupil. He and Piker were friends. They had an understanding.

"Sorry to go on at you, love," he said with an apologetic smile. "I know that it bores the pants off you."

"But it doesn't, Colin. Not in small doses, anyway."

"I'm a bit obsessive, aren't I?"

"Only on Monday evenings."

"Is it that noticeable?"

"Put it this way," she said, amiably. "We never used to have this trouble before you took on the job. I think you're sainted. I mean, who else would want to be locked away for two hours with convicts?"

He gave a shrug. "I like it."

"Heaven knows where you find the energy to take on an evening class when you've been teaching at the college all day. I couldn't do it. When the school bell goes at four, I can't wait to sign off and get out."

"Yes, but you have a house to run and a family to feed."

"Don't remind me." She checked her watch. "I must be off soon."

"What time does David's film finish?"

"Ten-thirty. You've got plenty of time. I've got to drive all the way over to Kidderminster." She cleared the plates away. "Coffee?"

"Please."

"It'll have to be instant."

"Decaf, please."

They chatted away while she filled the kettle and plugged it in.

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There were many other domestic matters to discuss and they got through several before the coffee was finally ready. As she brought the two cups back to the table, a sudden thought nudged her.

"Would it make any difference?" she wondered.

"Difference?"

"To the way you look at this Alan Piker."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you obviously like him and you talk about him as if he's some kind of unfortunate victim of the system. Suppose he isn't?" she asked. "Suppose he's been deceiving you?"

"Don't be silly, Jean? How can he deceive me when he never speaks a word? You don't teach for as long as I have without being able to pick up a person's vibes. I go on gut instinct and that tells me he's genuine."

"Genuine what, though? Victim or villain?"

"Alan Piker is no villain," he insisted

"Suppose you're wrong?" she challenged. "Suppose you find out that he was convicted of murder? I bet you'd look at him very differently then, wouldn't you?"

It was three weeks later when there was a subtle change in his manner. Piker began to look up at Colin Richmond during their games. They were neutral glances, but they marked some kind of advance. Colin was pleased. He felt trusted. When they came to the end of one game, Piker set out the board for another, wrapped in his impenetrable silence. Colin crossed over to see how the others were faring. Triggs was lost. Megson had him in check again and the old man could see no way out. Colin schooled him in delaying tactics, but even he could not rescue Triggs from the inevitable defeat.

Loomis and Slattery were well matched, each taking it in turns to outwit the opponent and draw a string of expletives from him. Colin stayed long enough to offer a few words of advice to both of them, then he drifted back to his own table. Piker was deep in contemplation. He did not look up at all this time. Playing with intense concentration, he pushed Colin to the very limit of his ability before making a foolish mistake that allowed the teacher to move in for the kill. Heavy footsteps in the corridor outside signalled the end of the session. The door was unlocked and a prison officer came in to bark an order. As they rose to their feet, the men went through their verbal rituals.

Piker was the last to leave. Waiting until the others had gone, he looked Colin full in the face for an instant, then removed something deftly from the inside of his shirt. Before Colin could see what it was, Piker slipped it into the box of chess pieces, sliding

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the lid quickly back into position. He stepped out into the corridor to join the file of men who had poured out from the other evening classes. While the prisoners were taken back to their cells, Colin stood alone in the room with his cheeks on fire. He was at once apprehensive and delighted, afraid that he had been endangered by Piker's behaviour yet thrilled that the young man was trying to communicate with him in some way. What had he slipped into the box? A message of thanks? A gift?

Dying to find out, Colin was too frightened to open the lid. After collecting his things, he went back up the circular staircase with the other teachers to the cramped office they used as a staff room. After comparing notes, they all drifted away. Nobody ever lingered. When Colin came through the last of the many doors and stepped out into the street, he inhaled the fresh air of liberty with his customary relish. Then he hurried to the sidestreet where he had parked his car. He got into the driving seat. Only when he was sure that he was quite alone did he dare to slide back the lid of the box. His eyes widened with astonishment when he saw what was inside.

The long envelope was addressed to Mrs. Susan Piker. It was not sealed. Inside it was an object that must have taken countless hours of work to make. Colin lifted it out of its coating of cotton wool so that he could examine it more closely. It was a miniature crib, made entirely out of matchsticks, so well crafted that it actually swung on its tiny frame. In the crib was a matchstick child with a painted face. Colin was staggered by the artistry involved. Piker's silence was productive. It was a paradox. The one man in Colin's class who did not smoke had used dozens of matchsticks to create a small work of art.

It had to be kept from the others. Colin could imagine how they would have teased him if they had seen it. Loomis would have been particularly scathing, and Slattery would have railed against the prodigal use of matches. Piker was the outsider in the group. The crib would have given the other four the perfect opportunity to reinforce that point. One of them—Triggs, most probably—would have wanted to destroy the object. Triggs was ineluctably drawn to matchsticks.

There was a letter with the gift. It was written in a cultured hand. When he read it, Colin felt duly honoured.

My love,

I am giving this to Mr. Richmond in the hope that he will deliver it to you. He is a kind man and his chess class is the one good thing about being in here. I love you and miss you more than I can say. My thoughts are all with the baby. It is not long now. I'm sorry I won't be

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with you when it is born but I am sending this crib as a token. Making it has helped to keep me sane. If he delivers it, please thank Mr. Richmond. He can be trusted.
All my love
Alan

Colin Richmond was both gratified and embarrassed. Pleased at the great trust that was being shown in him, he felt, at the same time, that he was intruding on a married couple's privacy, being a sort of reluctant voyeur. His discomfort was increased by his sense of guilt. In bringing the envelope out of the prison, he had committed an offence. When he first took on the class, he had signed a form to say that he would not engage in any discussion of the prisoners' crimes with them, nor smuggle anything in or out of the institution for them. Colin had betrayed that pledge. It made him feel anxious yet simultaneously exhilarated.

After all, he had got away with it. Who would ever know?

Piker would know. They were already accomplices. If the gift were delivered to his wife, she would find some way to thank him, perhaps even see him on Visiting Day. It would do no harm to take the missive to Susan Piker, and there were distinct benefits. Not only would he have the pleasure of helping a young couple in an awkward predicament, he would meet Piker's wife and learn something more about the man whose extraordinary silence had at last been broken.

Placing the crib gently back into its cotton wool, Colin restored it to the envelope. He looked at the address. The house was in Handsworth, within easy driving distance of the prison. He made his decision and drove off without a backward glance.

It was a large, crumbling, Victorian property in a rougher part of an area known for its racial problems. Colin got out of his car and looked up at the house. It had been divided into flats. Pop music blared out of one open window. Sounds of a violent row came through another. Colin was about to go up to the front door when a nervous voice hailed him.

"Did you want someone?" she said.

"Yes," he replied, turning to see the young woman who was walking along the pavement towards him. "Mrs. Piker."

She looked anxious. "Are you a policeman?"

"No."

"Then who are you?"

"A friend of Mr. Piker's. I have something for his wife."

"From Alan," she said, brightening. "You've come from Alan?"

"Yes."

"What have you brought?"

"This," he said, holding up the envelope.

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"Let me have it—*please!*"

As soon as he saw her, he guessed that she must be Susan Piker. She was a short, slim woman with fair hair that framed a face of wan beauty. The telltale bulge beneath her dress showed that the pregnancy was in its last stages. She looked frail, lonely, and impossibly young. Colin decided that she was exactly the kind of wife that a man like Alan Piker would have chosen.

When she saw the crib, she let out a gasp of joy and tears welled up in her eyes. She read the letter at speed before looking up at him.

"Thank you, Mr. Richmond," she said effusively. "You don't know what this means to me. Thank you so much."

"I was glad to help, Mrs. Piker."

"Letters are all I have, you see. Alan won't let me visit."

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't want me to see him in prison. He's very proud. We write to each other but, of course, those letters are all read by the prison officers first. There's no privacy. And he could never have sent the crib out through the post. Thanks to you, I got the gift and a letter that nobody else has seen." She searched his face. "Unless you read it, that is."

"No, no," he lied.

"Good. Alan says you can be trusted." She glanced towards the house. "I'd invite you in for a coffee but it's only a bedsitter and it's in such a mess. It was all I could afford at such short notice."

"Short notice?"

"Alan served the first part of his sentence in Maidstone Prison. That was fine because we have a house in Canterbury. I felt close to him. Then they moved him here a couple of months ago and I was completely cut off. Even though he won't let me visit, I have to be near him. Can you understand that, Mr. Richmond?"

"Of course."

Colin was touched. He was glad that he had acted as messenger. It was heartwarming to be able to bring some measure of relief to a young woman in obvious distress. She was gazing up at him with such gratitude that he blurted out his offer before he could stop himself.

"Would you like me to take a reply?" he offered.

"A reply?"

"To your husband's letter."

She clutched at him. "Would you, Mr. Richmond?"

"If you like."

"Oh, I do. Alan would be so thrilled. It's difficult to write a letter when you know it will be read by someone else first. Prisoners have no rights at all. It's disgraceful. I mean, it's not as if Alan is a real criminal like the others. He stood up for his principles, that's

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all. He took direct political action and they locked him up. Alan is a martyr."

Jean had the evening meal all ready for him. They ate it in the kitchen so that David, their son, could do his homework in the dining room. Their daughter, Emily, was watching a television programme in the lounge. When he got back, Colin slipped easily into his contented family life. It was such a contrast with the situation of the Pikers.

"You're late this evening," observed Jean.

"I got held up."

"Did he beat you?"

"Who?"

"Alan Piker."

"Almost," he said, remembering their tussles on the chessboard. "He's so alert. His mind is four moves ahead all the time. Luckily, I think at least five or six moves ahead." He speared a potato with his fork. "By the way, you were wrong about his being a murderer."

"Was I?"

"Yes, Jean. He's a political prisoner."

She winced. "Not IRA, I hope?"

"No, nothing like that. I don't know the full details. My guess is that he's either an eco-warrior or an overeager protester in the animal rights lobby. The man's got such integrity. It shines out of him."

Jean let him lecture her for ten minutes before she managed to shift him away from his prison experience. Though he spoke with fondness of Piker, he made no mention of the letter he had delivered on the man's behalf. Jean would not approve. She was too law-abiding to condone his action. Besides, it was a secret that Colin enjoyed sharing with Alan and Susan Piker. All three of them were now involved in a harmless conspiracy that was protected by silence.

"How was college?" asked Jean.

"Much as usual. What about you?"

"We had interviews for the music post today."

"Anyone promising?"

"Not really," she sighed. "They all have good qualifications on paper but can they keep discipline? Our kids are a real handful."

"Not when you crack the whip over them, Jean."

"Most of my time is taken up with admin. Being a headmistress has its advantages, but I do miss the classroom contact. There's nothing quite like the buzz you get from one-to-one contact, is there?"

"Oh no," said Colin with real feeling.

And he thought about Piker.

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She was waiting for him at the cafe where they had arranged to meet. Colin bought himself a coffee, joined her at the table, and exchanged a few niceties. Susan Piker seemed slightly more at ease with him now. He felt accepted. Making sure that nobody was looking, she took a letter from her handbag and passed it across to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Richmond."

"It's the least I can do."

"I don't suppose . . ." Her voice tailed sadly off. "No, you've already done enough. It's unfair of me to ask you."

"Ask me what?"

"To bring a reply from Alan."

"Won't he send that through the post?"

"Not if you agree to help us."

"Then I will," he volunteered. "Obviously, there'll be no reply this week. Your husband won't even be able to read your letter until he's back in his cell. But I daresay he'll have something by next Monday. Would you like me to bring it to the house?"

"No, no," she said. "We can meet here. After you leave the prison. That way, I'll get Alan's letter as soon as possible."

Colin readily consented to the plan. He went off to another session with his class. The envelope she had given him was carefully concealed in one of the boxes and he set it down on Piker's table with the board. To distract the others, Colin gave some bookmatches to Slattery and a copy of the *Birmingham Evening Mail* to Megson. They were delighted with the unexpected gifts. Colin chatted with them far longer than usual. When he sat opposite Piker, he saw that the board had already been set. The letter had disappeared from the box but there was no acknowledgement of its existence from Piker. He lapsed into a silence that was even more profound and brooding than ever. It was not until he left that he made contact, giving Colin's arm a gentle squeeze of gratitude. It was enough.

The following week, the situation was reversed. It was Piker who hid an envelope in the box. Colin smuggled it out and took it to the nearby cafe. Susan Piker sat there in some discomfort, shifting her position on the chair.

"Are you all right?" he asked in concern.

"The baby's kicking again," she replied.

"When is it due?"

"There's only a fortnight to go."

Colin gave her the letter, then went over to the counter to order coffee for both of them so that she could read the missive alone. When he sat down again, her face was alight.

"Thank you!" she said. "Alan was right. You're so kind."

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"How long is his sentence?"

"Too long. I'd rather not talk about that, if you don't mind. It depresses me. We just want to put it behind us so that we can get on with our lives." She touched her bulge. "All three of us."

"Won't they give him compassionate leave?" he asked.

"Leave?"

"To come and see you at the maternity hospital."

She was bitter. "No chance of that!"

"But they sometimes let prisoners out for family funerals."

"This is different. They want Alan to suffer. He gets no concessions." Her tone softened. "Except for the chess class, of course. That's the highlight of his week."

"And mine," he said to himself.

Colin Richmond was in high spirits on the following Monday. After an excellent day at the college where he lectured, he set out for the prison, stopping off at the cafe to collect another letter from Susan Piker. But she was not there. Though he stayed as long as he could, she did not turn up. There was only one explanation. The baby had come sooner than expected. Since she had no means of contacting him, she could not let him know. Piker would be disappointed that there was no reply to his last letter, but it could not be helped. Colin hurried off to his class.

Two police cars were parked immediately outside the prison. When Colin was admitted, he sensed an atmosphere of tension. He turned to the officer on duty at the gate.

"What's going on?"

"Haven't you heard?" grunted the man. "Escape."

"When?"

"This afternoon. Bugger got away in broad daylight."

"From *here?*" said Colin is amazement. "How?"

"He was working in the garden. Hit one of the officers over the head with a spade, then climbed over the wall. A rope was thrown over for him. I'd like to use it to string the bastard up."

"Who was he?"

"Name of Piker."

Colin blenched. "*Alan* Piker?"

"You know him?"

"Yes. He was in my chess class."

"Then you'll know what a slippery customer he is. Escapes are always organised from the inside. Must have got messages out to his accomplice somehow. They reckon there was an ambulance parked on the other side of the wall. Driven by a young woman, according to one witness. He made off in that." The officer curled his lip. "Piker should never have been allowed into the garden. Not with his record of violence."

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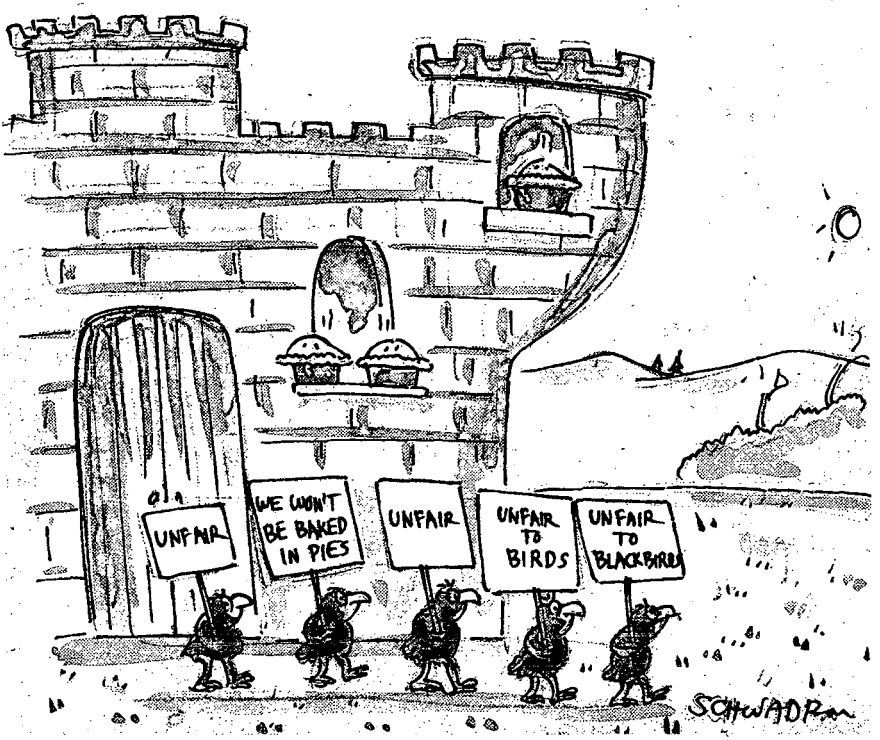
"I thought he was a political prisoner."

"That what he told you? Don't you believe it. He was in for armed robbery. Building societies, mostly. Somebody usually got hurt in the process. Piker was vicious."

Colin was reeling. In a flash, he saw how it had all happened. He had been tricked. There was no baby. Susan was probably not even married to Piker. She was his accomplice in the escape. There was no point in giving the police her address in Handsworth. Colin realised now that she did not live there. On the evening that he called there, she had been waiting for him, making sure that she caught him before he reached the door. Piker had warned her to expect Colin. She had played her part to perfection.

The chess class was buzzing with the news, and Colin had a job to interest any of them in actually playing a game. He could not wait until he was let out of the prison, terrified that he might be flung into a cell himself for his unwitting part in the escape plan. When he got home, he did not say a single word about Piker. Indeed, from that moment on, he never mentioned his work at the prison again.

Colin Richmond now lived in his own silence. ●



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Don't Go Upstairs

by Donald Olson

Donald Olson's stories of well-mannered, mostly conventional people confronted with situations which cause them to engage in anomalous violence carry an echo of the British Golden Age of mystery fiction (though Mr. Olson is, of course, American, a native of upstate New York). In Mr. Olson's well-ordered fictional world you won't find people engaging in unseemly behavior, but you will sometimes find that their actions have a subtle deadly twist . . . ¶

One clear day near the end of June, Vera Maddox set off upon her errands without the dimmest foreboding that within hours her world would have fallen apart.

From the hairdresser's she drove to the library to return some books and from there to Valley View Hospital, it being her day to volunteer in the gift shop. Leaving the hospital some four hours later, she spent another half-hour in the supermarket. Planning meals was never a chore. Vera enjoyed cooking and her husband Webster's taste in food was undemanding, although lately his appetite seemed to be somewhat off. He insisted that he was feeling fine and Vera attributed his recent preoccupied air to the pressures of work. Webster was a sales rep for a chain of electronics stores in the metropolitan area.

Web had told Vera he would be home early that day and she thought he might like to eat on the patio: grilled chicken breasts and one of her special salads with a bottle of Chardonnay.

She arrived home shortly after five. Web's Volvo was in the garage. Vera carried her purchases through the breezeway to the side entrance. They seldom used the front door. She opened the screen and found a note thumbtacked just below the window of the inner door. She saw at once that it was in Web's handwriting.

Darling, don't go upstairs. Call the police. Forgive me. Web.

Vera opened the door and stepped into the kitchen, clutching the note in her hand. She moved across the hall and set foot upon the stairs, for it never crossed her mind to obey the note's injunc-

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tion. She felt nothing so strong as panic, only a quickening direful curiosity.

The silence at the top of the stairs unnerved her. She spoke his name, too loudly. "Web? Web, are you up here?"

The reality of what she saw through the open bedroom door assailed her with the jarring suddenness of a stroke that numbs the brain. Web's body, clothed in the suit, shirt, and tie he was wearing when he left the house that morning, lay on the bed; the pink-flowered counterpane was soaked with blood. His face and part of his head were simply not there, only shattered bone and tissue and blood. The fingers of his right hand were still curled around the gun.

Three months passed. It was September. Leaves to rake, food to prepare, errands to run. Essentially the same routine Vera had followed before Web's death. There remained, of course, the emotional vacuum, with nothing to fill it. Vera had known women, a few, mostly older, who had experienced the agony of grief and eventually found other things to occupy their lives, had either turned into busy widows or formed new emotional attachments. Not Vera. For her, the concept of a "new life" was unimaginable. She was mired in the past, eternally beset by the mystery of what had happened. The endless nagging unanswerable question of *why*.

In reflecting upon their lives over the past few years, Vera discovered nothing to explain Web's action. Had they been happy? Well, conventionally so, she'd always assumed, and yet the longer she pondered, the more she began to wonder. Not about herself, for so far as she could see her devotion to Web had been unimpeachable. But had *he* been happy? Or even satisfied with his lot? She recalled the gradual change in their relationship, the absence of passion, Web's bouts of moodiness.

Web's affairs were all in order; he'd left Vera financially secure. The postmortem had disclosed no potentially fatal disease. Why, then? Why had he done it?

The only friend with whom Vera felt she might have been able to share her bewilderment was no longer available. Lynette Dolloff and her husband Pete had been next-door neighbors, but after their separation Lynette had moved far up the coast to Cold Harbor, to a house she had inherited from her parents. Vera never really understood what had happened, how Pete could have left so pretty and vivacious a wife as Lynette, whom Vera had always liked and admired. They could not have been closer friends before the Dolloffs broke up.

Lynette had come down for Web's funeral but had declined to remain with Vera for even a few days. Quite naturally, Vera had

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felt hurt, remembering how solicitous she and Web had been, how they'd been there for Lynette when she was left alone.

There had been the occasional exchange of letters and now, three months after Web's death, Vera took it into her head to get away from the house for a while and phoned Lynette to ask if it would be convenient for her to drive up to Cold Harbor for a day or two. Lynette's reply astonished her.

"I'd love to have you, you know that, Vera, but this might not be the best of times. You see, I'm just back from my honeymoon."

"Your *what?*"

"It's true. I've remarried. His name is Nestor Munsen."

Vera was surprised, but not that surprised. No one as young and pretty as Lynette could be expected to remain single. "Why didn't you let me know? I'd love to have been there."

"We didn't have a wedding. Just the briefest of ceremonies."

"Where did you meet him?"

"On a cruise, would you believe. You must meet him, Vera. Look, why *don't* you come up?"

"No, you're right. Not a good time. I wouldn't be the best of company for honeymooners."

"Then soon, okay? I'll call you."

Nestor, thought Vera, what sort of name is that? Wasn't there a Greek god or king called Nestor? He probably looked like a Greek god, just as Pete had been very good-looking. Sensuous Lynette had an eye for a man's physical charms. For Vera, the sexual side of marriage had been its least important aspect. Now she wondered if she had shortchanged Web in that regard. Not that he'd ever complained.

Something happened that same week to disturb the tranquil surface of the stream upon which Vera felt herself drifting into a future as dully predictable as the past.

She had finally got around to clearing out Web's closet, a task she'd deliberately put off, perhaps for no other reason than that to dispose of Web's clothes would be to sever one more link in their life together. Web had had a fondness for expensive clothes, and owned more suits than he needed. One by one Vera removed them from their hangers and checked all the pockets before packing them for donation to the Salvation Army thrift store.

Which was how she came upon the folded square of paper tucked away in the inside pocket of a Harris Tweed jacket. She was about to toss it into the wastebasket but then, on impulse, unfolded it and found it to be a short letter, typewritten but certainly not a business letter.

Dearest Web, This afternoon was magic. I dream of being together like this for the rest of our lives. I don't know what I'd do if

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you were to betray your promise to me. Kill myself? Kill you? Maybe both. You're my last chance for true happiness. I love you. Lorna.

Beneath the signature was the impression of a kiss in crimson lipstick. It seemed to add a sickening tawdriness to the letter itself. Vera read it twice, three times, four times. When had it been written? She couldn't recall Web having worn that jacket since early last winter.

She went downstairs, took from the cupboard the sealed bottle of Chardonnay she'd bought on that afternoon she'd come home to find Web dead. Now she drank it like water. It did not still the rapid beating of her heart.

Looking back, she found her blindness amazing. Web had been having an affair and she'd never felt the faintest tremor of suspicion. How adroitly Web had deceived her.

Later, after the shock of discovery had passed, Vera sat wondering if one line in that letter might have held an ominous significance. Was it too utterly farfetched to suspect that Web might *not* have killed himself? Suppose he *had* betrayed whatever promise he'd made to this Lorna. Or suppose she had a husband who'd found out about the affair and taken his revenge.

Such mad thoughts swirled around Vera's brain, at one moment appearing ludicrously fanciful, at another acquiring a chilling plausibility.

There could be no evidence to weigh against the ruling of suicide. The body had been cremated. The gun? Undeniably Web's. The suicide note indisputably in Web's handwriting.

Vera deliberated the wisdom of going to the police; showing them the letter. Would they dismiss it as being too flimsy a premise on which to warrant reopening the case? Perhaps if she could first learn more about Web's lover . . .

Would anyone else have known? Pete, for instance? Web and Pete had been close, as close as Vera and Lynette. Might Web have dropped some hint to Pete that he was involved with another woman? Only Vera had no idea where Pete had relocated after the breakup with Lynette.

Ever since the police had returned it to her, Vera had carried Web's suicide note in her handbag. Why, she could not have said, knowing only that every so often the compulsion would come upon her to reread it, as if still seeking some clue or answer to his action between the words of that single line. She had never shown the note or confided its contents to anyone aside from the police, not even to Lynette.

The gun was another matter. She *wanted* to get rid of the gun, fully intended to get rid of it but hadn't yet decided how to do it.

Closure, something of a buzzword now, but Vera knew it was

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what she wanted, an end to uncertainty, a clue to solve the enigma of Web's suicide. With this in mind she made a call to Cold Harbor.

"I'm ashamed not to have got in touch," said Lynette. "Nestor keeps nagging at me to invite you up for a weekend while the weather's still good. And I will, soon as I get the decorators off my hands. How have you been, Vera?"

"I'm fine. Well no, not really. I've been getting these crazy notions in my head. That's why I'm calling."

"Crazy notions? You? Sounds a bit out of character. What sort of notions?"

Vera felt suddenly reluctant to go into specifics. "I was wondering if you knew how I could get in touch with your ex."

"Pete? Why on earth would you want to get in touch with him of all people?"

Vera floundered. "Well, it may sound silly . . . you'll probably laugh . . . I thought Pete might be able to tell me something about Web."

"What could Pete tell you that you don't already know? What is there to know?"

"Maybe a lot of things, I've come to believe. Pete and Web were very buddy-buddy when you lived next door. I thought if I could just talk to him . . . "

Lynette laughed. "Honestly, Vera, I don't know what you're on about. I thought by now you'd have come to terms with your loss. Put it behind you."

"I can't. Not yet."

A sigh drifted over the line. "Well, if it'll make you feel any better, by all means talk to Pete. I have his number in New York, if he's still there. Hold on, I'll get it."

Pete was plainly astonished to hear from Vera. There was a polite exchange of greetings before Vera broached the reason for her call.

"Lynette said you couldn't help me but I've nowhere else to turn. It's about Web. You knew him better than anyone, Pete. Maybe even better than I did. If I ask you something, will you promise to tell me the truth?"

"I'll try, of course." Did she already detect a faint tone of wariness?

"Do you know if Web was having an affair?"

"What gives you that idea?"

Vera told him about finding the letter. "From a woman. A love letter. I needn't tell you what a shock it was."

"Vera, I'm sorry."

"Then you knew?"

"No, I didn't."

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"Truly?"

"Web never confided in me, if that's what you mean. But I sort of suspected something after what Ronnie Barmore told me. You remember Ronnie?"

She did, not with pleasure. "That loudmouth bore on your bowling team?"

Pete chuckled. "He is, rather."

"He told you something about Web?"

"Look, it might have been nothing. I don't even recall where it happened. Ronnie happened to mention having dinner with a client at some out-of-town motel. As he was leaving, he caught a glimpse of Web in the parking lot. He was with a woman. When he saw Ronnie he turned away and hustled this woman into his car and drove off."

Vera tried to picture the scene. "Did he say what the woman looked like?"

"That's what amused Ronnie. Not like a business associate, he said. Platinum blond hair, big dark glasses, a flashy dresser."

"Does the name Lorna mean anything to you?"

"No, why?"

"The letter was signed 'Lorna.'"

"Vera, what does any of this matter now? Web's gone. If he had secrets they died with him. Why torment yourself?"

She knew that Pete would be no more impressed than the police would likely be. "I just wondered if it all had anything to do with the reason he killed himself . . . if he killed himself."

"If? Come on, Vera, don't start imagining things."

"Pete, there had to be a reason."

"Maybe I've given you one. A guilty conscience."

"Oh, one more thing, Pete. Did you tell Lynette what Ronnie had seen?"

A slight hesitation. "Yes, I did."

"Was she surprised?"

"More like angry. She said you had a right to know. It was her duty to tell you. I finally talked her out of it. Told her it was none of our business and could only hurt you if there was nothing in it."

"Thanks, Pete. You've been a good friend. I hope everything goes well with you."

Having talked to Pete, Vera wasn't sure what she felt. Neither anger nor dismay, not even a sense of betrayal. Too late for that. And maybe Pete was right. Maybe Web had found himself in a situation he couldn't handle. A weight on his conscience he could no longer bear.

Vera did, however, feel bad about Lynette. Plainly, Lynette had no longer felt quite so comfortable around her and Web. Vera felt

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the need to put her friend's mind at rest, and the only way to do this would be to talk it out with her face-to-face. Make Lynette understand that had she revealed what Pete had told her, it could not have changed the way things turned out.

Fearing that Lynette might put her off, Vera decided to drive up to Cold Harbor without first calling. And a thought passed through her mind as she made the decision. She remembered Cold Harbor, the house perched above the water, the long pier lined with boats. What better way to get rid of Web's gun? She wanted no more reminders of what had happened. She would cast the gun into the sea, and Web's suicide note as well. Tear it up and scatter it as if it were Web's ashes upon the waters.

It was a solid stone-built house overlooking the harbor, isolated from its neighbors. It had been in Lynette's family for generations. They'd had money, money which had eventually all come to Lynette.

Vera rang the bell and waited, somewhat regretting she'd come all this way unannounced. They might not be home. Still, the trip wouldn't have been wasted; there was that other purpose. She could feel the weight of the gun in her bag. What a relief it would be to fling it into the sea, the gun and the note. A symbolic rejection of the past and all its sorrows.

She had about decided there was no one home when the door opened and she was confronted by a deeply tanned man with blond hair and beard. It was only when she looked into his eyes, those blue, blue eyes, that the shock of recognition robbed her of speech.

"Hello, Vera," he said. "We rather expected you might show up sooner or later. I wouldn't be here if we'd known."

The blond hair and beard had momentarily fooled her. The eyes and that subtly mocking smile were all too familiar.

All she could say, in a strangled whisper, was, "I don't understand. Web . . . "

"Wrong, old dear. It's Nestor. Nestor Munsen. Well, do come in."

One step and she felt herself sway. He grabbed her elbow and led her to a chair. "For God's sake, don't pass out on me, Vera."

She was scarcely aware of what was happening until he thrust a glass in her hand. "Brandy. You need it."

The brandy burned her throat but took away the giddiness. She said again, "I don't understand. I don't believe this."

And then he was urging her to her feet, leading her into a big room to a chair facing French windows with a view of the sea. He sat facing her with a look of amused irony.

"I'm truly sorry you had to find out this way, Vera. That you had to find out at all. We didn't plan it that way."

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"We?"

"Lynette and I, of course. You never guessed?"

"About Lynette? How could I? I found a letter in one of your jackets. From someone named Lorna."

He made a face. "Careless of me."

Even as they talked, and she knew they had to talk, Vera sensed the distant approach of something too horrible to contemplate. "I talked to Pete. He said you'd been seen with a woman. A blond woman."

"Lynette in a wig, and her floozy outfit. Her Lorna role. We had to be careful."

"How could you have done that to me? Leaving me that note. Leaving me to find . . . who did I find, Web? Who was he?"

He shrugged, rubbed a hand along his beard. "A nobody. A bum, really. Lynette found him. In some bar. We'd begun to think we never would find the right guy. He had to have certain—qualifications. A loner. No family. A fair resemblance to me. We knew you wouldn't be home that afternoon. She took him to the house. I shot him on the bed. We dressed him in my clothes. We took a hell of a risk. We knew that. But it worked. Exactly as we'd planned."

"You murdered him. My God, and for what? Why didn't you just *tell* me?"

He replied with disarming candor, without that edge of irony in his voice. "You may not believe this, Vera, but I didn't want to hurt you. Neither of us did. I honestly believed you'd rather I was dead than know I'd been unfaithful. With Lynette of all people."

"Dear God, I don't even know you. I never did."

"Too true, old girl. You never wanted to. All you wanted was a safe, cozy life, without surprises, without passion. I stood it as long as I could. And then Lynette and I . . . well, it happened, what more can I say? We both wanted the same things."

He stood up. "So what are you going to do, Vera? Go to the police?"

"Yes!"

"And make a fool of yourself? There's no evidence. No proof. Webster Maddox is dead. A handful of ashes. The note was in my handwriting. It was my gun. A clear case of suicide."

"Your fingerprints are still the same."

"Oh, Vera, Vera. Even if they chose to check out your story it would be too late. They'd never find us. We're leaving the country. We've planned it for a long time. Lynette's in town making last-minute arrangements." He looked at his watch. "She should be home before long. End of story, old girl. Not a very edifying one, but there you are. Now I don't wish to be rude but I think you'd better leave. I've got to change."

His lack of remorse appalled her, that bland psychopathic indif-

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ference. There was no other term for it. Frightening to realize this was the man she'd been married to for all those years.

Swept by an overwhelming sense of moral outrage, Vera knew she could not simply walk away, pretend she need take no responsibility for what he'd done and what he might yet do.

As he turned away she asked one final question. "Is that what Lynette calls you, Web? Nestor?"

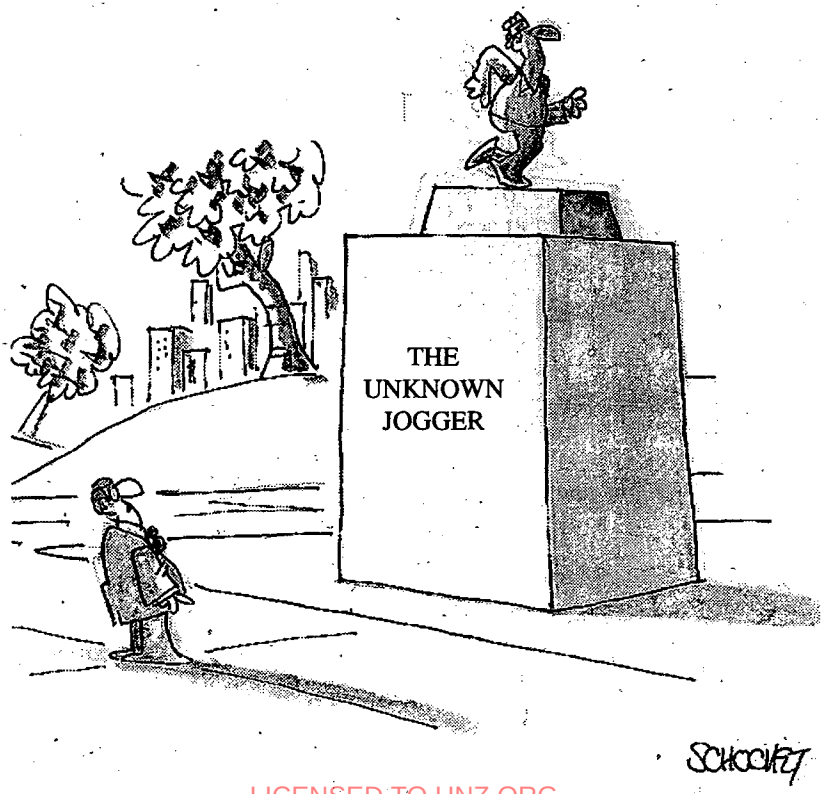
He glanced back at her with no inkling of the question's fatal relevance, "Good God, no. She calls me Web. Always has, always will. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"Goodbye, Vera. You can let yourself out." She watched him walk out of the room and up the stairs. She waited a minute or two before following him, first picking up her bag, heavy with the weight of the gun.

Lynette returned about a half-hour after Vera had gone. She found a note attached to the door. It was in Web's handwriting.

Darling, don't go upstairs. Call the police. Forgive me. Web. ●



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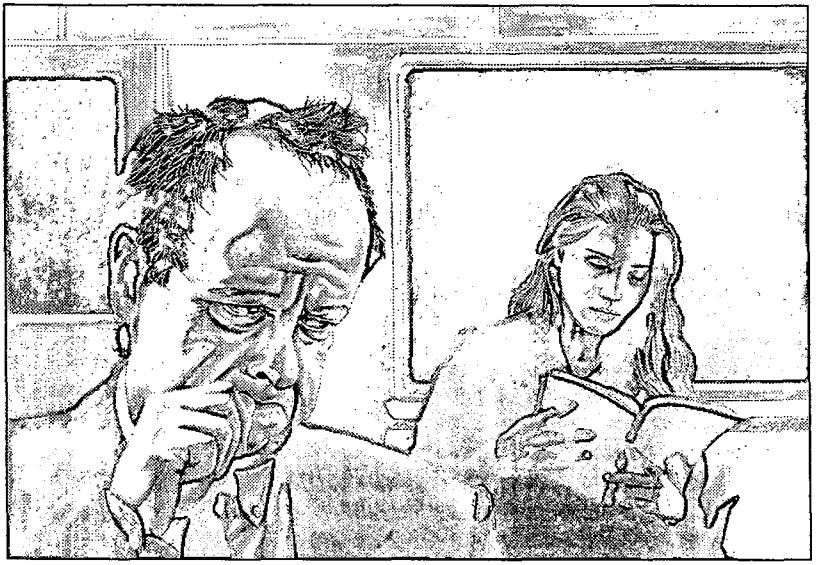

Art by Steve Cavallo

THE STEALING PROGRESSION

by Tom Tolnay

Barney Dreer was shocked by what he had done.

One autumn evening, on the way home from his office, he stopped at the neighborhood mini-market to buy a loaf of bread. As he drifted up and down the aisles, he had a powerful sense there was a second item he needed, but he couldn't remember what it was. In the rear of the store he stopped to eye the tubs of butter, quarts of milk, containers of sour cream, trying to remember. The only other customer in the market was up front, checking out her groceries. Always very careful with all of his expenditures, rather than lay out money for something he might not need, he picked up a packet of cheddar cheese, extra sharp, and slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

Knees wobbling on his way up front, he snatched a loaf of white bread off the bakery shelves and halted awkwardly at the check-

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out counter. When the cashier rang up his amount on the register, he fumbled in his wallet, pulled out two one-dollar bills, and held them out with a shaky hand. He felt his face fill with blood as the matronly woman handed him his change. Without looking at him, the cashier stuffed the bread into a brown paper bag. He thanked her twice and rushed out of the market, sucking in air as if he were suffocating.

A recurring theme in Tom Tolnay's fiction is the desperation of lonely individuals in urban settings. In his new story for *EQMM*, the sort of person you'd probably not notice on a crowded street turns slowly to crime. Mr. Tolnay's knack for slowly building a psychological portrait through patient attention to detail has earned publication for his short stories in many national magazines.

Down the track of concrete he hurried toward his apartment building, the package in his pocket thumping against his ribs, feeling more like five pounds of potatoes than eight ounces of cheese. All the way home he kept looking back over his shoulder, and resolved never, ever to do such a crazy thing again.

By the time he entered the lobby of his building—a stack of bricks slapped together after World War II—he was genuinely surprised not to have been accosted by the grocer, arrested by a policeman. Upstairs in his kitchen, Barney sat down at the chrome-legged table and, without removing his jacket or loosening his tie, ripped open the cellophane-sealed cheese with a steak knife. He sliced off a corner of the cheddar, dropped the chunk into his mouth, and began chewing uneasily. The soft cheddar had a rich, tangy, heady flavor that dizzied him. Continuing to cut and drop chunks into his mouth, he chewed steadily, unable to remember when cheese, when any food, had tasted so delicious.

Later that evening, as he watched *The Munsters* on TV, he felt calm enough to reflect upon his misadventure, and could not help noticing how easy it had been to get out of the store with the cheese in his pocket, even though he'd made many mistakes—thanking the cashier twice, racing out of the store with a bright red face. Being a person who prided himself on his efficiency in whatever he undertook, he began to consider, purely hypothetically, how the job could be done more efficiently. It gave him something out of the ordinary to think about.

Barney Dreer considered himself a good businessman, and his mind was quick—especially when it came to numbers: He operated his own one-desk tax preparation office. Each day during tax time he would brush what was left of his dusty hair and put on a

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jacket and tie before heading out to do his duty. Unfortunately, his professionalism didn't help him make friends: Clients, neighbors, and strangers all steered clear of him. Even his regulars preferred to do most of their business by mail, fax, computer, or telephone. Thus Barney learned to talk and laugh to himself, spending nearly all of his time adding up deductions, cooking omelets, watching reruns on television, and maintaining order in his apartment and his office.

The older he grew, however, the less satisfactory these simple diversions became. Though not a religious man, he joined a church social group—where it seemed to him that everyone ignored him piously. For a time he took up reading paperback romances, but all this did was remind him he was neither heroic nor romantic, not even tragic enough to arouse compassion in those who passed along the fringes of his life. He even ventured into the People Connection on the Internet, but received only a couple of incomprehensible responses. It was after he failed to connect on-line that fate intervened to provide a distraction: The tax man committed his first theft.

Despite his best intentions, the sweetness of that first chunk of stolen cheese virtually assured that Barney would try again. Next time he shoplifted—a pint jar of strawberry jam—he managed to avoid many of the mistakes he'd made the first time, though not all of them. He was obliged to commit a string of small thefts—chocolate chip cookies, a can of peas, a pork chop, packets of instant oatmeal, a box of tea bags—before he really started to get the hang of it. In the process he learned not to steal heavy, bulky items that would show under his clothing, or something that might break if it slipped out of his pocket, and to avoid certain types of cellophane which tended to make telltale noises when crinkled under the arm. Although he got away with the goods in these new capers, and eliminated his earlier mistakes, he also made several new ones, such as glancing over his shoulder furtively. If he could only eradicate these errors, he could retire with his accounts in order. And he certainly intended to bring an end to this business; he was not a terribly moral person, but as a tax man with a few small retailers among his clients, he didn't like the idea of reducing the potential profits of the stores he victimized.

The trouble was, through stealing he was experiencing certain satisfactions. Each time he consumed some unpaid-for item of food—anything from an apple lifted from the produce stand to a fillet from the fish stall—he noticed he no longer felt quite as downhearted as before. As a result, his compact three rooms in the Bronx—outfitted with a Formica kitchen table and chrome-tube kitchen chair, a worn-cushioned love seat, a 19-inch TV, a pressboard desk, a mattress on a black iron frame, a square night

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table, and a scratched maple chest of drawers—no longer seemed quite so confining or dismal.

Over the next few weeks, however, something as difficult to pinpoint as a change in the barometric pressure set in, and he realized that consuming stolen food was having less and less beneficial effect on his moods. One afternoon, overcome by panic at the thought that this balm might no longer be available to him, Barney did something out of the ordinary: He called up a new client who had come to him over the telephone via his boldfaced directory listing. The gentleman had spoken kindly to him, and his tax return had interested Barney more than most.

"I need . . . to go over your return . . . in person," the tax man stuttered into the mouthpiece.

Next morning a stocky, icy-haired man in mismatched trousers and jacket stepped breathlessly into Barney's office, which was not much wider than a public-school wardrobe closet.

With a quivering finger, Barney pointed to the metal chair alongside his desk. "You got a potential problem with this medical deduction," he rasped, staring gravely at the open file folder on his desk.

Having a head-on look at the tax consultant for the first time, the client squirmed in his seat—or so it seemed to Barney, who was all too conscious of his droopy left eye and misshapen upper lip, legacies of a blow delivered by his father many years before.

"What makes you say that?" the man challenged.

"I seriously doubt the IRS'll make allowances for depression drugs in such large amounts."

"It's a legitimate expense," the client insisted, inspecting the business-school diploma hanging on the wall.

"In my twenty-five years in this game I've seen the IRS call taxpayers downtown for much less questionable deductions," Barney stated with authority, "and the first thing they'll want to know is whether all these drugs were prescribed by a practicing MD."

"I got receipts."

"Between you and me," Barney said in a confidential tone, "I saw a report on TV that showed these depression drugs do nothing except kick up stock prices for the pharmaceuticals."

"That's not the point!"

"Maybe so," Barney muttered, "but as someone who's working on your behalf, I think you ought to know there're other ways to deal with this trouble."

"What trouble?"

"You know, being down in the dumps once in a while."

"What're you driving at?"

"I'm no doctor, but talking from personal experience I just want to say that maybe what you need is less drugs and a little more . . . excitement in your life."

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Gripping the armrests, the man started to tremble. "I came here for *tax* advice, not *personal* counseling."

"You're absolutely right," Barney said agreeably. "I only brought it up because I had a similar problem, and I've managed—"

The man stood up abruptly. "Give me back my tax papers."

"Why don't you sit down a minute and we'll discuss this calmly—no need to get upset," Barney suggested, surprised by his client's reaction.

But the older man reached across the desk, scooped up the folder, tucked it under his meaty arm, and said, "You're nuts!" He swung open the door and slammed it behind him.

In the silence that followed, Barney hoisted himself onto his feet, stepped to the open window, and extended his upper torso beyond the sill. At last he saw the white-haired man emerge from the building and disappear around the next corner. For a long while he watched the people shuttle back and forth across the concrete. From ten stories up they seemed insignificant, not worth the trouble of getting to know any of them.

Noticing the Super Mart on the corner, from which he'd stolen and enjoyed food for several meals, he was struck by a thought: The clerks in the stores he successfully stole from were the only people towards whom he felt any real friendship. Maybe stealing a variety of products from a variety of stores would be something like having a circle of friends . . .

That evening, on the way home from his office, Barney visited a neighborhood hardware store and walked out with a box of nails in his pocket, but no sales slip. The next afternoon it was a bookstore and a pocket book of horror stories, and the following evening he emerged from a paint store with two brushes—and nothing he wanted to paint. At first this strategy seemed to help lessen his anxiety, but an hour or two after each theft he could feel something begin to squeeze his heart again, making it difficult to breathe.

On weekends Barney began taking the subway down to department stores along Thirty-Fourth Street in Manhattan and riding the bus up to the shopping malls of White Plains, visiting women's cosmetic and clothing departments. Initially this strategy seemed to have little positive effect on the constriction in his chest. But after it had occurred to him to sit on the edge of his bed and sniff the pilfered powder puff or fondle the snitched scarf, he found that the internal grip would loosen, and the floating panic settled down deeper (if uneasily) within him, as if lying in wait for an unguarded moment to resurface.

Since he tended to feel congenial toward establishments from which he'd stolen with relative ease, Barney looked upon these stores as his best friends. If a store's counters were situated in

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such a way as to make stealing inordinately difficult, however, or if guards were posted at all exits, he became indignant and would refuse to spend time in that store in the future. If a particular kind of loot—a silky piece of lingerie, for example—seemed to make the bad feelings stay away longer, he would go after lingerie again, using a toilet booth in the men's room to stash a see-through negligee in his briefcase.

The more skillful he became—learning to use his own or someone else's body as a shield, or to tuck stolen goods deftly into items he intended to purchase—the safer he felt. At the same time, because he needed to steal more often and in new situations to satisfy his craving, he was placing himself directly in the gun-site of the law of averages, which to him was as immutable as the law of gravity. Stores were becoming highly sophisticated in discouraging shoplifters, to combat what had been characterized in the media as a national epidemic, amounting to billions of dollars in lost goods annually. Increasingly he was confronted by electronic detector gates, computer-coded clothing tags, video cameras. All this worked on his mind, especially at night, when he should have been asleep.

His collection of barrettes and tubes of skin cream and silver bracelets and fancy perfume bottles and ladies' underwear continued to grow in his chest of drawers, kitchen cupboards, medicine cabinet, shoe boxes under his bed, and in two large cardboard boxes stacked in his hall closet. This accumulation made him nostalgic for the times when he'd been able to consume most of what he'd stolen. Worse yet, the more he gathered from stores, coddling these objects or applying them to his shoulders or rubbing the satin over his face, the less his tension seemed to melt away. Again he could sense the panic rising up out of that murky zone beneath his consciousness. All day at the office, all evening at his apartment, he thought about how he might stave off what now seemed inevitable. Soon his work began to suffer, and his usually tidy apartment began to resemble a Salvation Army thrift store.

Suspecting the relief he found in stealing was somehow associated with the people he imagined buying such products, he thought: *What better way to get closer to someone than by acquiring something that already belongs to a human being?* Even as he came to this idea, he recognized that stealing directly from a person is quite a different occupation than stealing from a store. To pick a pocket or swipe a purse one had to assess each opportunity with extreme caution; one needed a light, steady, quick hand; one had to place oneself increasingly in situations where human beings gathered, coming in close contact with them. To steal from a person required a readiness to be confronted, too, a prospect that frightened him. But he had no choice.

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Though he usually walked to his office—at least in dry weather—he started taking the crowded subway every day, and scanned newspapers for reports of forthcoming parades, festivals, demonstrations. And he began to carry a thin-bladed folding knife on his person at all times.

Barney Dreer undertook a series of dry runs in which he did everything but actually swipe something from the individuals he had targeted. These dry runs occurred in the subway, in the lobby of a hotel, at a parade along Fifth Avenue, and it didn't take him long to acquire a grasp—at least theoretical—of the fundamentals of picking pockets and purses. In the process he learned how to turn the attention of a victim in another direction without raising suspicions; and, though it both intimidated and excited him, how to bump into a person and make it seem accidental.

Riding the Fordham Road bus on a Friday evening—dozens of passengers jammed together with their packages—Barney dipped his hand into the shopping bag of an elderly gentleman and got off at the next stop with a small brown bag containing a pound of ground beef. Though he fried up a fat, juicy hamburger an hour later, the pressure in his chest did not diminish, and he wondered if it was because he hadn't stolen something that was personal to the old man. The next morning he moved up behind a teenage girl in a local variety store and, brushing against her, used his thumb to slide a cigaret lighter up out of her back pocket and into his hand. She never even glanced his way, causing Barney to beam with a sense of accomplishment as he walked out of the store. Nor did he feel quite so down as before.

In the ensuing weeks he stole mostly from women because, in the past, he'd been able to loosen his miserable tension more effectively with female goods, and because, in general, women did not seem to be as attentive to the dangers of being victimized. The range of things that could be stolen from them, furthermore, was considerably greater, and more intimate. Fancy handkerchiefs, perfumes, necklaces, lipsticks, scarves, earrings, an extra pair of shoes. What he coveted most, however, was a woman's wallet—though not for the cash: Money belonged to everyone rather than to individuals and therefore never seemed to chase his moodiness away. Yet he'd managed to appropriate only two wallets—one that was without interest from a schoolboy, and one from an elderly woman wearing a thin black coat, looking as if she were in mourning. In her wallet he had come across pictures of her husband, children, and grandchildren. As he looked them over, Barney imagined himself into these photos—out on the stoop, in the backyard, surrounded by smiling family members. It was a life that he, the son of an alcoholic father and an unstable mother, had never known.

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As Barney soon discovered, moving targets were not always cooperative, and once he nearly got caught by a college student, narrowly escaping by bouncing out of the subway car just as the doors closed. Afterwards he started taking the subway at a different station and time. Yet Barney refused to revert back to stealing from stores, understanding in some primitive way that going backwards would only make him more depressed. He merely kept alert—a predatory beast, waiting for the right victim, the right moment. The unwholesome weight continued to collect in his chest, as though, each night, someone were placing another heavy stone inside his ribcage as he slept, making it increasingly difficult for him to haul his body out of bed each morning.

One evening, with his stomach coiled like a rattlesnake as he rode the subway home, he spotted a young woman—hair the color of peaches, lips as bright as strawberries—holding onto a passenger hand-grip directly across from him. Her beauty startled him, causing him to forget that he should never stare at a potential victim. On her way home from her job, like everyone else in the train, she seemed dazed by the long workday. Aside from her beauty, what excited Barney was that her eyes were closed and her left shoulder supported the strap of a floppy handbag without a clasp.

When the train stopped with a jolt at the next station, and the passengers fumbled like bees to get in and out of the hot, airless subway car, Barney edged toward her, pretending he was being forced in that direction by the incoming crowd. The closer he got to her, though, the lonelier he felt. Her smooth-as-ivory hands, her mass of curly hair, the close-fitting sweater she wore shot a pang of longing through his body—sensations that staggered him with their sudden force. For the first time in years he pictured himself caressing a woman, and this shocked him, for his feelings of separation had never struck him as carnal; rather he'd always associated them with the absence of innocent companionship. Sex was a totally different matter, as far as he was concerned. And it brought up the matter of his own inadequate physique: five feet two inches high, three feet four inches wide around the middle.

Edging into position adjacent to the young woman, Barney checked out the passengers—to make sure no one happened to be looking toward him. He folded his arms across his chest. Then, his left hand dangling free under (and concealed by) his right elbow, he waited for the train to rock back and forth (as it always did), and when it did he tilted sideways toward her and eased two fingers into the open corner of her handbag. Gripping a corner of her makeup case, he began straightening up and, in doing so, his little finger tugged the strap of her bag slightly. The case slipped out of his fingers and back into the black leather womb.

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The young woman glanced at him, her eyes open as wide and as blue as morning glories. A shiver traveled the length and breadth of his body as the train stopped and the doors grunted open. Blindly, he backed out and pushed through the crowd that was poised to gush into the car. When he reached the exit turnstile and heard the train doors close, he peered toward the car and spotted the redheaded woman: She had turned to look out the window and follow his progress across the platform.

Up the stairs out of the black hole of the subway he climbed, biting off a corner of his thumbnail as he emerged into the cool moist evening. Weary, impatient figures pushed past him, in a hurry to get home and sit down with loved ones at the dinner table. Having gotten off three stops too soon, Barney began the long journey to his apartment, passing through a parallel row of dreary storefront buildings that were losing the battle against the corporate tide of retail competition. The night seemed murky. As he wobbled along the commercial street, his eyes focused on an ancient couple in front of him; they were holding hands like teenagers strolling through a park.

His failure on the train undermined Barney's confidence to such a degree that, by the time he'd entered his building, he resolved to stop stealing altogether. "No percentage in going up against the law of averages over and over," he muttered. It wasn't merely because he might be arrested, possibly locked behind bars. Even more, he feared that his picture might appear in the *New York Post*—TAX MAN NABBED AS PICKPOCKET. All five boroughs of the city would have a long, hearty laugh at his expense. His nose swelled at the thought of such public humiliation.

At his kitchen table, while making a bologna sandwich for dinner, Barney experienced a sharp clasping in his chest and, though he felt certain it wasn't so, he half wished it was the onset of a heart attack. Dropping the slices of bread, he hurried to his hall closet and pulled out an orange crate that contained his favorite purloined items. Into the bedroom he went, sitting down on the edge of his mattress. One by one he began fondling the objects, whispering endearments to them, placing them around his neck and on his shoulders. But the gold heart on a chain, the rhinestone broach, the pure-silk scarf, the transparent negligee, the lace brassiere—none of his treasured items helped to lessen the pain. That night on his lumpy mattress he was able to sneak away from consciousness only intermittently.

More mistakes started showing up in his calculations at the office, and he had reason to believe other clients might not return to him the following tax season. His sleep went from poor to miserable, and he began getting forgetful, one time leaving his keys stuck in the deadbolt lock of his apartment so that he was unable

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to unlock his office and get a day's work done. A scowl carved itself into his face, and although he'd never been communicative with his neighbors—he used to nod at them upon occasion—now he clenched his fist whenever someone passed him in the corridor. The slightest annoyance—an abrupt waitress, a shoelace that came undone—would launch him into a rage.

The grim weight started spreading from his chest into his stomach and groin. But it was this new level of despair that enabled him to see what he needed to do next: The only way he'd be able to regain his confidence would be to steal from the woman who'd nearly caught him. Calling up the image of her face in his mind, he indulged himself in the fantasy of sliding his stubby fingers very near her flood of red hair, her creamy skin, as he reached into her handbag, into her soul. These thoughts made him feel more relaxed than he had felt for days.

Next evening Barney Dreer, wrapped in his best jacket—a dull blue serge—and choked by a thick gray tie, with dark-rimmed prescription sunglasses notched on his nose, stationed himself on the subway platform where the first car of the train normally stopped, the car in which he'd failed to secure the makeup case from the young woman. Chewing on his cuticles, he waited for five forty-five: Office workers tended to board the same car at the same time every evening. The train screeched to a halt, humming and trembling electrically in the station. Once the riders had poured out of the doors, Barney entered and scanned the car to establish her location before weaseling toward her—but he couldn't find her anywhere.

Barney's shoulders sagged as the train jerked forward, rolled into the long tunnel that lay between stations, and began rattling through sheets of flowing, harrowing blackness. He felt like baggage being carted to some distant, indefinite point in time and space. Occasionally the lights in the train blinked off, on. He unfolded his newspaper and raised it in front of his face, pretending to read. Glancing around for a possible replacement, he thought: *Maybe I should just be patient and try to find her tomorrow.* But he shook his head vigorously at this idea. *Who knows what'll become of me if I don't do something tonight?*

At the next station people pushed out of and into the car, jostling him toward the middle. He moved without resistance, keeping his eyes sharp for any opportunity that might present itself. From this new position, through the windows of the sliding doors between cars, he spotted the redheaded woman seated in the second car. Her delicate facial bones and swanlike neck were poised over an open magazine. Barney's heart started thudding so fiercely he was afraid others might be able to hear it pounding, pounding.

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With a burning sensation in his stomach he made his way through the crowd, elbowing passengers aside as he passed out of the door of the first car and into the door of her car. Subway riders glanced at him with annoyance, and he realized he'd made a mistake in attracting their attention. Afraid she might recognize him, he kept his face turned away as he snaked between passengers toward the place where the woman was seated beside the doors. The train clattered furiously through the dark tunnel, faint lights flashing by the windows like a horror-house ride at Playland. His legs shaking, the newspaper folded under his arm, he nudged a schoolboy out of his way and sidled into position next to her. Not having noticed anyone watching him, he opened the tabloid in front of his face and observed the woman from behind his sunglasses. Her hair was brushed out to its full length, and she wore a pleated black skirt and a short brown jacket that was unbuttoned. At the open neck of her cream-colored blouse he saw a pendant on a chain, which looked like a thin gold scar across her throat. Her black leather handbag, sticking out of the shopping bag on the floor, caught his eye, but just then he was more interested in the fact that she wasn't wearing a wedding band.

Barney didn't like reading newspapers very much anymore—too many murders, too much sex—yet he often carried the *Daily News* because it was a versatile tool. In addition to hiding behind its pages, he could use it to stash pilfered items. And if someone was on to him, he could toss the tabloid into a trash can while it still contained the goods—to be retrieved afterwards. The *Times* was too large and unwieldy for such operations. Folding his newspaper like a pair of jaws, he bent down at the waist as if to scratch his knee. What he really did was reach toward the woman's handbag, concealing his hand with the paper. For a second he thought he would be overcome by the rose scent of her hair, and when he touched the soft skin of her handbag, his heart fluttered wildly like a trapped bird. But he had set his feet firmly and, with a fluid motion, slid his hand under the flap and lifted out the first thing his fingers touched—instantly clamping the newspaper over it. Then he straightened up. Though it had all taken just three seconds, it had felt like three hours.

Her wallet was in his pocket! But he forced himself to temper his excitement, knowing the moments immediately following an episode were just as critical as those preceding it. *Take a look around. Slowly. Is anyone watching? Does the woman seem to be aware of me?* The redhead continued to read an article in the magazine—"Great New Hair Styles for Spring!" The rest of the passengers seemed lost in the tunnels of their minds, too. Turning away from her gradually, he gazed out the window at the steel

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girders of the approaching station as they whipped by until the train began to slow and came to a halt. He had timed it perfectly.

Perspiration oozing out of his forehead in droplets, he stepped out of the train the moment the doors slid open, and he was carried forward by the crowd emptying from the car. In half a minute he heard the doors snap shut. After he'd drawn a deep breath, Barney whispered to her from afar, "You really ought to keep your handbag on your person at all times," glancing at her through the window of the car that had begun to pull out of the station. Six minutes later he got on the next train that pulled in and rode it two more stops to his neighborhood.

Triumphantly he strode through the damp evening air toward his apartment building, thrilled by each bump of the stolen wallet against his thigh. Not only had he managed to steal from someone who had noticed him previously, but he'd gotten away with her wallet. "I'm going to flush all that stress out of my system tonight. Who knows?—maybe I'll get rid of it forever." By the time he had inserted his key into the lock of his front door, another delicious thought had come over him: *Her whole life is in the wallet, and now it belongs to me.*

Wrestling his body out of the jacket, he withdrew the wallet from his trouser pocket and dropped down on the edge of his mattress. Made of smooth red leather, the wallet seemed like a human heart lying in the palm of his hand. He removed its contents and arranged the pieces in rows—like numbers to be added on a sheet of accounting paper—along the parallel ribs extending down the stained white bedspread. Three photographs were in the collection—one of the young woman upon graduation from Fordham University, according to the banner behind her; one of a middle-aged couple; one of a good-looking blond fellow in his twenties. Barney wondered if he was her boyfriend.

A couple of quarters were in the coin pouch. One ten, three fives, and four one-dollar bills were in the billfold section, but he was vaguely disappointed to notice they were not placed in numerical order. He found, too, a torn ticket to a play. An ATM card. A lottery ticket. A phone calling-card. A discount coupon for Tampax. Assorted paycheck stubs from a small brokerage house off Wall Street; since the amounts were different and not very much on each stub, he thought she might just be getting started selling stocks and bonds on commission. And a folded newspaper clipping—FORDHAM GRAD, 23, DIES IN AUTO CRASH. Was it the young man in the photo? Well, no matter. He had her history in his hands, and looking over his bounty, out of raw delight he burst into laughter.

The most useful thing he found was her driver's license. Not only did it provide a more recent, though blurred, picture of her,

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but it revealed that her name was Laura Fahnestock and that she lived on the other side of the park, less than half an hour's walk from his apartment. Removing his glasses, Barney brought the license close to his face and flattened his lips against the image of the young woman. Now he lay down on the bed, closed his eyes, and waited. Within minutes he could feel a wet warmth begin to seep from his midsection into the rest of his body. After another couple of minutes, however, he realized something was wrong, and he sat up. The tension had not gone away.

Barney Dreer could not continue losing sleep, making mistakes at his office, living in a disorderly apartment, losing keys and clients. "I'll bring the wallet to the redhead," he said aloud, squeezing a pimple on his chin, "and tell her I found it in the subway." With tremulous hands he slipped each item back into the wallet, making sure the pieces were placed in the order in which he'd found them. Then he put on his jacket and forced the wallet into his breast pocket. In the bathroom he scraped a comb through his wispy hair, straightened his tie needlessly, and shined his teeth with a piece of toilet tissue. Minutes later he was stepping resolutely down the stairs of his building.

A mist was in the air as he walked along Fordham Road. He did not notice the people he passed, nor the stray dog that had followed him a short distance before giving up, as if realizing the short round man was not likely to befriend him. Soon he turned off the commercial thoroughfare and headed down a tree-lined street. After walking a few blocks, he found himself moving along the black iron fence of a spacious park, faced off by a row of squat two-family houses. The street was hazy with a glow that sifted out of aluminum buds suspended from curved poles. Though each day was remaining lighter a little longer, the evenings still retained the dull chill of winter, and it would be another month before the warmth of the day carried fully into the night. Except for a distant drone of automobile traffic, all was quiet—so few people were out on the street this time of evening, most being at home watching the evening news together, and the workaholics not due to arrive until hours later.

By the time he located her residence—a wood-frame two-story dwelling with tan, fake-stone siding—much of the mist had melted away and the sky had darkened as if rubbed with charcoal. The lonely man stood under a broad, twisted tree, looking up at the lighted window on the second floor. He wondered if the house belonged to her parents; the thought made him edgy: *Suppose they see me out here, staring up at her window. They might call the police. And the police'll question me and find out I stole her wallet.*

Pressured by the powerful immediacy of his need, however, he tried to reassure himself: "With no lights on downstairs," he whis-

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pered, "there's probably no one else home." And not having seen a wedding ring on her finger, he decided she probably wasn't married and lived alone in the upstairs apartment. Aware of his heart throbbing against the wallet—against her heart—under the desultory flutter of leaves, Barney found himself moving through the swaying shadows toward her house.

At the door he took hold of the knob and twisted it, and the door opened into a compact vestibule. He went in. Through the curtain of the glass inner door he could see the stairs that led up to her apartment and, holding his breath, he gripped the inside doorknob and twisted it gently—locked. Checking out the pair of doorbell buttons, he saw the bottom one read ADAMSON, but the upper had no nametag. *Maybe her parents don't live downstairs after all,* he thought, and whispered her name: "Laura Fahnestock." The sound of her name on his lips reminded him he would have to look her in the eye and speak to her. If she recognized him, she would surely cry out for help or jump back inside and call the police. And what if she had a boyfriend upstairs, or someone really was home downstairs?

Backing out of the vestibule, profoundly discouraged by the fact that he lacked the courage to place himself face-to-face with risk, he stepped down the stairs and moved heavily to the sidewalk. For several moments Barney felt entirely devoid of hope . . . until a vague white light came into his inner vision. The more he focused on that light, the more he could see it had a shape—a small round white thing, and he was comforted to remember he had hundreds of these tablets in his medicine cabinet, waiting for him to return.

Passing under the branches of the broad tree, Barney heard someone emerge from the house, and he saw her red hair glistening in the porch light. The handbag from which he'd stolen her wallet was dangling from her shoulder. When she turned to lock the door behind her, Barney ducked behind the broad tree, his breath coming in short uneven gusts. Pulling the woman's wallet out of his inner pocket, he compressed it in his hand and had a distinct sensation that it was throbbing in his fingers. Out of sight in the thick shadows under the tree, amidst the soothing whisper of the leaves, he felt less apprehensive than at any time since first entering this neighborhood.

The young woman moved down the brick steps and turned onto the sidewalk in his direction. After she had passed well beyond his tree, Barney stepped out onto the sidewalk and followed her down the block. Because he did not have to look at her directly, he found himself able to cough out words: "Excuse me, miss, may I speak with you a moment?" Startled, the woman spun around and let out a shriek as her eyes settled on him.

"You needn't be afraid," he said, attempting to shape his mis-

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matched lips into a smile.

The woman began to run down the empty sidewalk, clutching her handbag, and Barney wobbled after her, calling out, "I've only come to return something that belongs to you!" He held the wallet out toward her. But she continued scurrying parallel to the spiked iron fence, toward the street lamp on the corner.

Glancing over her shoulder, the woman cried out, "Leave me alone!" But looking away caused her to lose her step. She tripped and fell, scraping her knee against the concrete. Near the gate to the park, a long way from the corner, she lay on the sidewalk, moaning and rubbing her knee.

As Barney closed in on her he noticed something bumping against his thigh, and reaching into his trouser pocket he found the white-handled folding knife. By the time he stood over her he had put away the wallet and opened the blade of the knife.

Bracing her arms and legs to rise, the woman gasped at the sight of the chrome-plated blade.

Barney said, "You needn't be frightened. I only want to return something of yours. It's back at my apartment, on the other side of the park."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you."

"But you must come with me," he said, "don't you see?"

When the woman had managed to stand up, Barney pressed the blade hard enough into her ribs for her to feel its point through the jacket, causing her to emit a low squeal. Barney felt elated to be standing so close to such a beautiful young woman.

Wild-eyed, the woman looked up and down the block, but no one was on the damp street. "What do you want with me?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you—you lost your wallet in the subway and I found it. I just want to return it to you."

"You're the man from the subway!"

Instead of being disturbed that he had been recognized, Barney experienced a rush of gratitude.

With the point of the knife pressing into her side, the woman stopped struggling, making low noises like a mouse caught in a trap.

"Why don't we go by way of the park—so much more pleasant, don't you think? The winding paths, the new grass, the trees beginning to bud."

Maintaining the pressure of the knife against her ribs, Barney led her through the iron gates into the park, and they moved down the black ribbon of tar, passing shrubs that had grown out of control last summer only to dry into a tangled mass by winter.

"Keep all the money in the wallet—just let me go."

"I'm not interested in your money," Barney said softly.

"*Please* let me alone," she whimpered.

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"Look!" Barney pointed. "The moon is breaking through the clouds. It's turning out to be a pleasant evening."

The pale, cold light of the half-moon was scattered by the branches, staining their faces with shadows.

"This time of night we'll have the park all to ourselves," he said, his eyes scanning the dark rows of dormant bushes, their spindly branches reaching out as if aching to burst into bloom.

The woman cried quietly in the darkness.

"Ah," Barney sighed, "a very romantic evening for a stroll through the park."

Barney, a short, bulky man, and the woman, tall and lean, moved haltingly along the winding path, through the broken lamplight. Far down the lane, a young man jogged across their path in the direction of a side gate to the park. Barney pressed the point of the knife more forcefully into her side, causing her to purse her lips.

Once the jogger had passed out of the gate, Barney said, "He's hurrying home to people who will listen to him."

The woman glanced at him.

Barney gazed up at the sky through an opening in the overhanging limbs of the tree. "The clouds are breaking up and the stars are coming out. Can you see them?" When she didn't respond, he said: "Don't you see them?"

"I see them."

"What do you say we sit down and enjoy the stars a little while?"

"No, please—it's too chilly."

The man used the knife to prod the woman to the nearest bench. "Have a seat," he said politely.

The woman sat down on the bench. Barney lowered his weight down beside her.

For a few moments they sat in silence, the woman rubbing her sore knee, the man breathing audibly. "My name is Barney," he said, lessening the pressure of the knife in her side. After a time he added, "And your name is Laura . . . Laura Fahnestock."

Surprised, the woman had an impulse to ask how he knew her name, but she remembered the wallet and drew her handbag close to her body.

"The stars are so big tonight, Laura, I just might pluck one out of the sky and give it to you—a cosmic diamond."

Laura Fahnestock said, "My roommate is going to wonder what happened to me."

"Roommate?" Barney muttered, wondering if she shared the apartment with her boyfriend.

"Your family . . . friends . . . must be waiting for you, too."

"You're the only one I have, Laura, and you're here with me, enjoying this lovely evening. Don't you think it's a lovely evening?"

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"Yes, it's a . . . lovely evening."

"Laura, I'd like you to do something for me."

"I'm wearing a gold necklace," she whimpered, "with a real diamond pendant." With a trembling hand she pulled the thin necklace out of her open blouse to show him. "You can have the necklace and all the money in my wallet. Please let me go."

"Didn't you hear what I said? I have *no* interest in your valuables!" Barney spat, poking the knife into her ribs hard enough to tear the seam of her jacket.

A cry escaped her throat.

Suddenly calm again, he said gently, "All I want is to hear my name on your lips. Will you do that for me?"

Slowly turning her head toward him, tears streaking her face, she looked at him head-on for the first time, and her eyes widened at seeing his tiny eyes, thinning hairline, and the suit jacket and tie he was wearing.

"In case you don't remember, my name is Barney. Will you say it for me?"

Wiping the tears off her face with her sleeve, she shaped her lips and forced out the syllables, "Bar-ney."

"Say it again, please."

"Barney . . . Barney."

"How nice to see you again, Barney—say that, too, Laura."

Stuttering, the woman got out the words: "Nice . . . to see . . . you again."

"You forgot to say my name."

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Nice to see you again . . . Barney."

"The pleasure is all mine," he said, grinning at her.

The woman trembled.

"You have a beautiful speaking voice, Laura."

"My roommate is expecting me to bring home dinner."

"How can you buy dinner when you don't have your wallet?"

"Oh, my wallet," she said, squeezing her handbag.

Releasing the pressure of the knife in her side, he reached into his jacket pocket and slid the wallet out of the soft cotton lining. For half a minute he rubbed his thumb over the red leather in his hand. "Here," he said, extending it toward her, "this belongs to you."

Silent at first, she stuttered, "Thank you . . . for returning it. I didn't even know I had . . . lost it."

The wallet passed from his hand into hers, his fingers brushing hers lightly.

"You've got to be more watchful of your belongings, Laura. All sorts of things can happen to a young woman in this city."

"I see what you mean."

With the knife in his hand pointing at her, Barney stood up and stared at the seated woman—the red hair and blue eyes had lost

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their color in the shadows. Raising the knife, he snapped its blade shut and allowed it to slide into his trouser pocket. "I've got work to do back at my apartment so I must be getting along."

The young woman did not move, did not make a sound.

"It was a great pleasure speaking with you, Laura," said Barney. "Good evening."

"Good . . . night," she said, adding stiffly, "Barney."

Barney trundled along the path toward a gate that lay out of sight on the opposite side of the park.

Shivering deeply, the woman continued to sit on the bench, the wallet in her hand, her eyes following the heavyset figure as he grew fainter until he had become one of the bushes of the night. Now she stood up on shaky legs and headed back to the gate through which they'd entered the park. Out on the sidewalk, moving toward the warm, lighted house in which she lived, Laura Fahnestock felt like crying, but no tears would come to her eyes.

As Barney Dreer approached the gate that would lead him back to his apartment, to the tax returns that lay scattered on his desk, a shooting star flashed across the sky, followed quickly by another and another and another: The black sky was crisscrossed with streams of light that sparkled and shimmered like strings of diamonds in a jewelry shop. He stopped to watch the shower of comets against the velvety screen of the sky, feeling profoundly connected to the vast expanses of the universe. ●

Never Too Late

by John M. Floyd

"You're Al Capone?"
He said: "That's right."
"You're dead, I thought."
He said: "Not quite."
"Then you must be—"
"I'm one hundred and one."
"So you're retired?"
"I tried. No fun."
"But how do you—"
"Get by?" he said.
He pulled a gun.
"Hands on your head."

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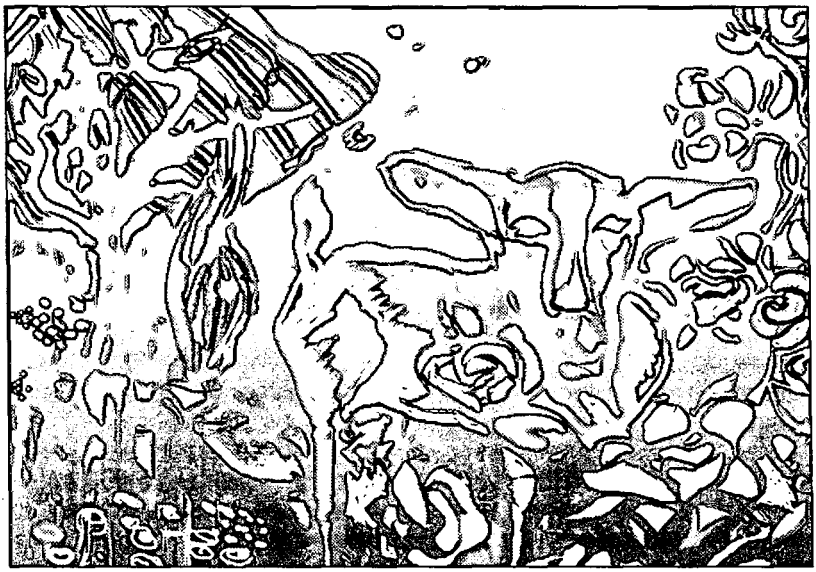

Art by June Levine

THE CAPRICORN MOMENT

by Amanda Cross

When I spotted the goat on the back lawn I knew the debate had taken a turn from kindly sparring to something more serious. I was drinking my breakfast coffee and glancing through the newspaper—one of the chief pleasures of my solitary life—when, looking up as I turned the pages, my eyes slowly and disbelievingly focused on the goat. She (there is no mistaking the sex of a goat) was happily chewing on a rose bush. I cursed and picked up the phone. "Parthe," I said when she answered, "enough is enough. Come and get the damn goat; she's eating my rose bushes."

"You have the wrong number, my dear," she said, and actually had the nerve to add, "I know nothing about a goat." I slammed down the phone and then, with increasing irritation, rang again.

"I don't think the goat is funny," I said when she again picked

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up. "This is not the sort of joke I expected of you."

"Quite rightly," she snapped, "since I didn't do it. I, on the other hand, never expected that you would take up drinking in the morning. Watch it, my dear; you know what can happen to us when we live alone." And clunk went her phone.

Parthe and I are longtime drinkers together, at five o'clock, and certainly not to excess. We had heard, via local help, that on the village grapevine we were known as imbibers. But no one had gone so far as to accuse us of drinking in the morning. Our drinks were carefully confined within a two-hour period. I sounded to myself, reflecting on all this, as though I saw some reason to be on the defensive; all because of that damn goat. Could Parthe herself have taken to early drinking?

Amanda Cross is the pseudonym of Columbia University professor Carolyn G. Heilbrun. "I began writing the Cross novels in 1963 because I could not find any detective fiction that I enjoyed reading," she said recently. ". . . What was it I wanted . . . and could no longer find? First of all, conversation, and an ambiance in which violence was unexpected and shocking." A love of good conversation lies at the heart of both this new tale and her new novel *Honest Doubt (12/2000)*. ¶

Parthe and I are close friends and neighbors. True, at least five acres of field and lawn separate us, but she is my nearest neighbor and a person I have long delighted in throughout our almost daily visits. On the weekends, my city friends come up, as do Parthe's stepchildren, so that we are separated for two or three days, depending on how long our various relatives and friends hang around. Monday through Thursday, and Sunday also, if all our visitors have taken themselves off, I walk through the fields from my house to hers and am greeted with enthusiasm and a drink. Then, when we have filled our glasses, we settle down to talk and eventually to refill them.

There has never been any question but that Parthe was glad to see me. She is, by now, in her eighties and content to stay home; or, as she puts it, is too old to go gallivanting and not as great a walker as she once was. In what I took to be a gesture of real affection, she had the man who mows her lawns create a narrow clearing in the fields separating her house from mine so that I can easily walk across from my house to hers, on an attractive, rustic, and private path, happily avoiding the road and traffic, and small field mice and other scurrying creatures I am not too fond of, the kind addicted to long, uncut grass. (My definition of rustic combines the natural world with all the comforts of civilization: cleared paths and modern plumbing.) Parthe agrees. In fact, we

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agree on most things, and the combination of my late fifties and her early eighties has afforded us much pleasure and the privilege of agreeing to disagree without animosity.

Yet this privilege seemed about to be taken from us, and all because of astrology. As I learned from Parthe and, by asking around, from others, astrology is either something you haven't ever considered, or something you regard as, if not nonsense, superstition. After all, the number of people on the earth at this moment, compared to the number of days in the year, or even hours and minutes in the day, hardly adds up to the likelihood of there being individual effects of stars, or planets, or whatever, on each person. What I find particularly silly is people's desire to see themselves governed by larger movements in the universe, though such desire probably accounts for most people's belief in God. Similarly, if one knows fraternal twins, as I do, born minutes apart and as different as can be, one can hardly suppose that the few units of time separating them can account for their wholly different personalities, characters, tastes, and attitudes toward life.

What is most annoying about astrology, of course, is the passion with which types like me argue against it, and the annoying calmness with which believers in astrology, like Parthe, set forth their analyses. Astrology, as I am fond of pointing out to Parthe, derives from a time when there was little science and much superstition to account for injustice, natural catastrophes, and the otherwise inexplicable. For heaven's sake, I said to Parthe, astrology supposed the earth to be the center of the universe; all pre-Copernican, all unsubstantial in the light of today's knowledge of how the solar system works.

When Parthe and I began talking together on a regular basis, I didn't even know what my sign was. She had to ask me my birthday and announce that I was a Capricorn. "Not that I couldn't have guessed it," she said. "Ruled by Saturn, it is associated with age. Capricorns are said to be old when they are young, and young when they are old." I had to admit that this did seem to fit me. "The important achievements of your life lie ahead," she said with that sense of all-knowing that really drives me up the wall—not that I wasn't glad to hear this particular message. That's the clue to astrology's fascination, you see. We absorb what we find useful or hopeful, and ignore the rest.

I have to admit, that being the case, that I was flattered by what she told me about Capricorn. It's a cardinal sign, as opposed to a mutable or fixed one; given the choice of those three, I'd gladly pick cardinal. If I'm going to be positioned in the zodiac, I'd just as leave be a leader, even if an unlikely one. Also, Capricorn is an earth sign, as opposed to the other elements. After all, fire, air, and water are part of dead philosophies, like the four humors,

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but being earthy is still a recognizable characteristic: having one's feet on the ground, I call it. But one doesn't want to be too earthy, to be incapable of aspirations, and so there is the goat who climbs mountains others can't get a foothold on. There's also some stuff about a goat having a fish tail, but that's when I lose interest; I only want the affirmative, interesting bit, like most people, I suspect. Let's go on to something else, I more or less said to Parthe. She simply chuckled in a knowing way that I attribute to her age and reputation for wisdom. It's a reputation she's really entitled to, as I would have been the first to admit before the astrology bit took over our conversations.

Parthe's full name is Parthenope. Her father seems to have been a jokester, one of those men who know a little bit about everything and manage to convince people they are widely read, that, though autodidacts, they are experts on anything you happen to bring up. He appears, in fact, to have been a magpie collector of odd and disparate facts, which accounts for Parthe's name. Somewhere he had read that Florence Nightingale was named for the Italian city where she was born—Florence was unknown before that in England as a woman's name—and her sister Parthenope Nightingale was named after the city in which she had been born. Their parents, like so many English people in the nineteenth century, were devoted to Italy. Imagine, Parthe's father liked to say, if modern nursing had been invented by someone named Parthenope Nightingale. And he named his daughter Parthenope to prove that someone with that name, which, unlike Florence, had never caught on, could still leave her mark upon the world. Now that I think of it, I suppose that having that name may have been enough in itself to turn someone into an astrologer.

That her father was of that particular turn of mind probably explains a lot about Parthe, including what makes her—or anyway made her—so delightful a person with whom to have a daily drink and conversation. Her name seems, in some odd way, to have given her license for unconventionality. That, in turn, led to what most people would call eccentric behavior. The townspeople whispered and speculated about her, exactly as though ours were an English village from the days of Agatha Christie, but they weren't anything but gracious to her face. In our town, as I suspect in English villages, money speaks, and Parthe has a great deal of it, not from her feckless father—he seems to have left her with nothing but an odd name and fancy ideas—but from her long-dead husband, who was very rich indeed. He married Parthe after the death of his first wife, and adored her, and, more to the point, admired her sufficiently to leave her all his money and worldly goods outright. In my nasty way, I suspect that the week-

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end attendance her stepchildren dance upon her is not entirely, as they claim, affection for her dear self apart from Papa's money. In fact, Parthe rather likes their coming and going—well, mostly their going—and she intends to leave them the greater part of their father's money, to which she feels, in her fair way, they are entitled.

I am sorrier than I can say that astrology, of all ridiculous subjects, should have come between Parthe and me, but sending around a goat is really more than an eccentric neighborly gesture. It smacks of presumption and even, though I hardly like to say it, rather too much eccentricity. There is eccentricity and then, on the other hand, there is going too far. I looked up again at the goat, who had moved on to a tree which I had planted and nursed from a pup. I determined to face Parthe, leaving her no opportunity to hang up on me.

I went out, approaching the goat with some care, but she seemed a friendly creature, looking up at me expectantly. I had brought a rope halter and a tether; she let me attach her to all this with what struck me as a kind of philosophic acceptance. "I won't be long," I told her, patting her bony head. I went back and got her some water in a plastic bowl, which I placed within her reach. She seemed grateful for the water, most of which she spilled; as I went back inside, I heard a crunching and looked back to see that she had started to munch on the bowl. Goats are certainly extraordinary creatures, and, astrology or no astrology, they were hardly the animal I most longed to be associated with. She was, though, a pleasant goat; I had to admit that.

While tending to the goat I was trying to decide what to say to Parthe, how to sound angry but controlled, sensible but still annoyed, as was my right. I straightened up the kitchen, went upstairs to make the bed, and dressed, all the time planning the sane, firm points I would present to Parthe.

We hadn't exactly been arguing about astrology; strictly speaking, we had been discussing what I should do with my life, what the next turn should be, and I was glad to talk it over with Parthe. She was indeed wise, in a way few old people are: She listened, and she didn't come up with ancient, useless, far-fetched bits of comment. I had an uncle I used to visit, but when he reached his eighties, he stopped listening, he only barked out criticisms, hurtful, useless, and worst of all, disinclining me to talk with him as often as I had been doing. As old people go, Parthe was a special case, which made her calling up of astrology on my account disappointing. I decided to suggest to Parthe that we agree to keep off the planets, the stars, anything metaphysical or unscientific. I will say for Parthe that she doesn't go in for

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seances, telepathy, or extrasensory perception. Just sun signs, rising signs, moon signs, and progressions.

For a good while now I had been talking with Parthe about this major decision I had to make. As I set out now on the path between our houses, I reminded myself how grateful I was to Parthe for providing me with a friend, an end-of-the-day confidante, and the companionship of someone who no more than I was suited to the social life of a village and the pettiness that seemed to go with it.

Parthe, like me, enjoyed the chance to measure out the events and thoughts of the day with someone who understood and enjoyed the special gifts of real conversation. I was already feeling mellower and more forgiving toward Parthe by the time I arrived at her house.

She, however, greeted me at the door with a worried look. "Holding up all right, are we?" she said.

"I've tethered the goat and given it water, which should do it for now. Where did it come from, by the way?"

"Forget the damn goat," Parthe said, with more acerbity than usual. "I've got a problem that, if you have the patience to hear me out, will present a bigger perplexity than a herd of goats."

"Problem?" I said, rather worried. Parthe rarely admitted to problems beyond the inefficiencies of the local help.

"Yes," she said. "A damn annoying quandary."

"Well, what do your various signs tell you to do? Isn't that what they're for, to consult when in a state of perplexity?"

"No," Parthe said. "That's what friends are for."

I felt ashamed of myself. "Sorry, Parthe; I do apologize, it's just that the goat got my goat. Can we start again?"

Parthe had, as usual, set out the glasses, the bottles, ice, and a bowl of pistachios on her screen porch. It looked over her garden, which she used to do herself but now left more or less altogether, and altogether unhappily, to a gardener. She sighed as we sat down, waiting for us to settle ourselves in our accustomed chairs with our accustomed drinks before telling me what the problem was. She seemed to have some difficulty in deciding to speak, which was very unlike her. I was seriously worried and managed to forget the goat.

"It's Harold and Sylvia," she said at last. Harold was her stepson; Sylvia was his wife. They were not particularly attractive or interesting people, but they had seemed pleasant enough, and Parthe had got used to having them around every other weekend. They alternated weekends with Parthe's stepdaughter, Marie, who was unmarried and sometimes turned up with another woman. Parthe and I both liked her and her friend, who talked, as Parthe said, "our language," and in addition helped around the

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house when she and Marie were here, finding things that needed to be done but which were more in potential need of attention than obviously falling apart at that very moment.

Harold and Sylvia usually brought cake or candy or wine when they came, but tended to go off on jaunts and to dinner at local restaurants, leaving Parthe at home; they always invited her to come along, and she always refused. I had long suspected that one of the reasons she didn't mind having them was that they weren't around that much. They didn't, of course, approve of Marie; it seemed that Harold and Marie had not got on very well even as babies and certainly not beyond. "He took one look at me," Marie used to say, "and feared I would grow up to bring shame upon him. Well, he was right." And she would chuckle happily. I quite liked Marie and her friend, on the rare weekends when I caught sight of them.

"What have Harold and Sylvia done now?" I asked. I was really worried, although it wasn't as though they could really do anything to Parthe. She controlled the money and could send them about their business any time she chose, couldn't she?

"Last weekend they stayed to have a talk with me. About politics and the Church: capital C. They turned out to be in favor of all the things I'm against, and against all the things I'm in favor of. Maybe they always have been, but what really worries me is that they decided to be frank about it all of a sudden. I should have kept my cool, but I couldn't help saying what I felt."

I didn't know what to think. But saying what one thought was always the way between us, even if one had to apologize afterward or alter it to make it more acceptable. "Why not just cut them out of your will?" I said. "Leave Marie her half and leave the other half to some worthy cause. Maybe to some liberal church, something really Christian, if you know what I mean. The Quakers, or the less moribund Presbyterians. Or leave Marie the whole thing."

Parthe would know what I meant about churches. There was a church in town she used to attend before she became more, well, housebound. The minister was after her own heart: open to all ideas and discussions, against discrimination of every sort, and inclined to preach about Jesus rather than Paul, about the gnostic gospels as well as the non-apocryphal ones. He had once preached a sermon about openness toward homosexuality, quoting from the Bible to underline his points. Harold and Sylvia had hated that church, attempted to get the minister removed, and when that failed, never darkened its doors again.

"I could do that," she said. "But that's only part of the problem—the minor part. I think they're going to try to get me committed to a home as unable to care for myself and in the throes of senility."

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"That's ridiculous," I shouted. "They can't do that. What possible grounds could they have?"

"The grounds," she said, smiling at the pun, "are that this house and grounds are really theirs, that I'm just an interim tenant, as it were, and that I am reducing the value of their inheritance."

"They probably want to sell it to a developer," I growled.

"I'm sure they do. Remember that Gertrude Stein left her paintings to Alice Toklas for her lifetime, but the eventual heirs got them away from her on the grounds that they were not safe on her walls."

"I do remember that. But those paintings were worth millions. This place, while magnificent, isn't that valuable, is it?"

"It will be. There are steps afoot to make it part of a golf course, or worse, a development. The rich are very active around here, and there are lots of them. I had told Harold and Sylvia that I intended to leave my property to the state as a park for the local people to enjoy. I know, most of them just want to hunt, but they might like a place to wander in. I told Marie too, of course, but she had no objection." Parthe owns a hundred acres or more; it would make a nice park.

She was terribly worried. She didn't refill her glass or tell me to refill mine. For the first time since I had known her, she was afraid.

"Parthe," I said, filling our glasses—we needed the reinforcement—"people can't just put other people into nursing homes. I know there're always those who will try for all the most nefarious reasons, but I'm sure they can't succeed. What makes you think they can?"

"All these weekends they've been here, they've been cultivating all the local right-wingers, fundamentalists, and anti-choice types. They haven't just been taking in the local sights, they've been building up a constituency. There are probably lots of established residents in these parts who would be ready to testify that I am peculiar, erratic, inclined to give money away indiscriminately, to name only a few indications of my mental instability. And the working-class locals, as you very well know, will testify that I drink. Also, I don't take care of the place: I've even had a path mowed from your house to mine, damaging the fields."

"How does it damage them?" I said. Not that it mattered, but I was having trouble thinking in a coherent way.

"And the truth is," Parthe said, ignoring my question, "that even if they don't succeed in this vile plan immediately, as I become feebler they'll try again, with more chance of success."

I looked out over the lovely garden, with the ancient trees, and thought how I hated Harold and Sylvia and their like, who always wanted to interfere in other people's lives with the least possible

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inconvenience to themselves. Homophobia and shooting doctors who did abortions were typical of their sort. Well, perhaps I was being unfair to them; all I really knew was that they were holier-than-thou, would do anything for money, and thought they alone knew what morality was. I forced my wandering thoughts back to Parthe, and away from Harold and Sylvia. Hate, I believed, was not productive: pondering on behalf of what one believed in was. I believed in Parthe.

"England is better," I said. "Or used to be. If the old party died too soon, the inheritance would be taxed within an inch of its life. Parthe, you can't seriously believe that they would go so far as to try to move you out of your home and take away your right to your own money."

"I wish I didn't believe it," she said. "I really do. It's my being all alone in the world that makes it so problematic."

"They're only stepchildren," I pointed out. "Surely that makes their rights in the matter less, well, definite."

"Not if the property was originally their father's; at least, not necessarily. Stepmothers are easily cast in the villain's role: a mad old woman holding on to their property and threatening to give it away when she is too old to know her own mind—that sort of thing." Parthe was far from her usual self, overwhelmed with worry.

"There was a woman from around here," she went on, "some time ago. Her children managed to get her committed. There was no one to take her side. The court doesn't appoint defenders for old people as it does for children; at least, it didn't then."

"But you can always hire your own lawyer; you can afford to pay a good one."

"Not as good as the one they can hire, and probably have on a retainer. The fact is, I feel like a sitting duck."

We sat quietly for a bit, Parthe worrying and me worrying about Parthe. Damn Harold and Sylvia and all their ilk.

"And how are you getting on with your decision?" Parthe asked. "I've monopolized enough of this afternoon's talk. Have you reached a decision?"

"Not yet," I said. My dilemma revolved around the question of whether to move on or not, go to New York and join my friends in a new project they were setting up or stay here living my country life: a bit of writing each day, a bit of woodwork, gardening, cooking up a storm on the weekends, directing theater productions at a nearby college. The proposed project was a television series; the pilot had done well, and I would be taken on to direct at least half of the episodes. It would be a chance to be involved in an exciting enterprise that could lead anywhere or everywhere; but it would mean moving to New York City and virtually giving up my coun-

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try life. Parthe, of course, had been torn, feeling on one hand that she very much wanted me to stay, pointing out on the other hand that I was a Capricorn and therefore getting on to the age when Capricorns come into their own. Capricorns, she explained, are associated with Saturn and therefore with age. Moving on, she had said, however reluctantly, is usually the wisest thing for a Capricorn, the acceptance of the next step. I knew she would miss me, and appreciated her objectivity, however astrological.

"Capricorn is an especially powerful sign," Parthe had said to me. "It is a moving force, and endows people born under that sign with the persistence to undertake necessary growth in the later years. All of which seems to suggest that you ought to move on, face new challenges, that sort of thing."

I wasn't up to discussing my need for a decision at this time, and Parthe clearly didn't want to talk about her fears any more that day. So after a few minutes, I set off for home, along the path she had had mown for me, looking at the fields and the woods beyond, and finding I could not bear the thought of all this beauty falling into the grasping hands of Harold and Sylvia and developers and golfers. I cheered myself up with a lovely story I had read about Henry James. Some bore was regaling James with an account of each of the golf strokes he had played that day. James took the man by the lapel: "My dear fellow," James said, "what a princely expenditure of time." My views exactly. I had also recently attended the funeral of a friend's father, an ardent golfer. Every speaker had used a golfing metaphor to describe the deceased. I thought it tedious and terribly sad.

But the boring aspects of golf were hardly germane to Parthe's problem. I walked along the path, feeling worse and worse, and when I finally reached home and went in through the back door, I hardly even glanced at the goat. She had more or less demolished her drinking bowl and was actually lying down. I decided to ignore her for the time being and went inside to think.

I put Elgar's cello concerto on the disk player and paced up and down in the living room, unhappy and with a terrible sense of being useless and helpless. Parthe had been so good to me. The path was only the most obvious sign of this. She had lent me money when I needed it, found me the people to help with necessary repairs to my house, and with the garden. She had welcomed me each day, and while I knew that I brought a long-needed companionship into her life, so she had brought a sense of order and control into mine—the result of having someone calm, sensible, and interested paying attention to what one said and what one's problems were. More than any of that, she had been my friend, the first real friend I could be certain of. There had been companions, yes, and loves, but not a friendship like this. I was, of course,

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ready to go to court and fight for her, but I knew from experience with people in the hospital, only relatives were allowed to make decisions, only relatives would be attended to on important matters, or even given a hearing.

There is a melody in the Elgar concerto which appears, then disappears, then appears again, or seems to. I found I was waiting for it. I sat down in my usual chair, my feet stretched out, my head back, and listened carefully. And then I knew the answer to Parthe's predicament.

I didn't leap up. I heard the Elgar through to the end and went to fix some supper. Later, I realized I had forgotten about the goat. I determined not to take any action for almost twenty-four hours, to just let myself rest with my decision and discover my real feelings, my fears, if any, my regrets, if any, should my decision hold. I ate; I watched television; I took a shower and waited in my bed for sleep, just lying there and inviting comments from myself. It may sound odd, or nuts, but to those who have tested judgments in this way, it will sound familiar.

The next afternoon I started again up the path. I had given the goat more water, and some human food and cat food—I don't know what goats eat, apart from everything. I laughed to myself, planning how after I had told Parthe of my conjurings, I would tell her that she bloody well had to do something about the damn goat.

Parthe tried to cheer up when I arrived, but she still looked distressed.

"I have solved your problem," I told her when we had settled down on the screen porch. "And incidentally, and just by the way, I've solved my own."

"Yes?" she said. She looked dubious.

"It's quite simple, really," I said. "We will get married. As your husband, I will have the ultimate say in anything to do with you, should they doubt your own words. I hope you'll agree, because I think it's a splendid idea."

Parthe looked at me as though I had announced a plan to visit the moon.

"Think about it," I said. "Just think about it seriously. No need to change our lives. Same meeting each weekday, same drinks, same wonderful consultations. But I shall be your legal husband, which will put a stop to any nefarious plans your stepson and his dreadful wife may be cooking up."

Parthe was still staring, her drink untouched. She reached out and placed her hand over mine. "Archie," she said, "that is the nicest thing anybody has ever said to me, and I shall think on it with happiness as long as I live."

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"Good," I said. "That's settled then."

"Don't be silly, Archie. I am at least twenty-five years older than you. Such a marriage would certainly bring my sanity into doubt."

"Maybe it will, but marriage is marriage. The courts are pretty clear on that. And by the way, we shall have a prenuptial agreement. Your estate, should you predecease me, will be left exactly as you have long planned it. My estate, should I suffer a fatal rural accident, will be left as I have already planned, except that it shall eventually join your land as a park."

"You can't be serious," Parthe said. She had decided to humor me.

"Dead serious; really serious. Believe me, Parthe, it will put paid to Harold's hideous plans, and that will give me infinite pleasure. Who knows what marriage really is? As far as I can observe, most marriages are at best compromises, at worst simple hell. Ours shall be a continuing friendship with daily meetings, as usual, except weekends, as usual. Of course, if you want to mingle your stepchildren with my friends on weekends, we will take that under advisement."

"What about the television series? You know it's the right thing for you to do now; you know moving to New York and directing the show is the right decision. I thought we had about decided that."

"Not really. You thought I ought to go on to the next rung of the ladder—I think that was your expression. Well, perhaps you are right, but perhaps the next rung isn't in New York. I think whatever it is I have to do with my life is right here, in my house, in my garden, as your husband and neighbor. It really is a good idea, you know; for both of us. You think it over and convince yourself that I'm right about this. You already are convinced, but it will take awhile to get your mind around it, as it did me. Then we'll call a lawyer, and the nice minister, and all will be beautifully done."

"Everyone will think you mad," she said. "Or worse, they'll think that you are after my money, and I am after young flesh. Well, comparatively young flesh."

"You've never cared what 'they' thought before," I said. "Why start now? And," I added, "while we're straightening things out, don't you think it's time you admitted to the goat. It was a cute way to make me face my destiny, and your astrological advice, I'll grant you that."

"Archie. Listen to me. I did not send the goat, I have never known a goat, and I would never place a poor animal in someone's backyard without their permission and probably not even with it."

"But . . ." I began.

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"No buts. I think you had better call the sheriff and institute a search for the goat's owner."

"I'll do that, if you'll marry me. Lawyer tomorrow; marriage ceremony next Monday. If you won't marry me, I shall simply go on feeding the goat cat food and let it eat up all my bushes. I'll go into mourning for my garden. Which is sad, since I've every intention of staying put right here."

In the end, Parthe agreed. She figured out, at least this is how I think it worked in her mind, that if she didn't marry me I would think she didn't trust me with her life and her money, and she wouldn't want me to think that any more than I would want her to think I didn't trust her. We were friends, after all.

So we were married. The minister kindly came to Parthe's house for the occasion, which we marked with our usual drinks, neither of us caring for champagne. The prenuptial agreement was duly signed and sealed, and life went on exactly as before. Exactly as beautifully as before.

I'm pleased to say that Harold and Sylvia, after setting the fiercest gossip mill in motion, stopped visiting altogether. Marie and her friend came every weekend, my various friends came on most weekends, and on weekdays I walked up the path to Parthe's house, and drank with her, and talked with her, and gazed out on her beautiful garden.

And, oh, about the goat. She turned out to belong to the owner of a horse who lived on the other side of the woods. The goat was the companion of the horse, who got lonesome and didn't like being alone in its stall. Neither did the goat, apparently, since she had wandered off in the horse's absence. A not unusual arrangement between horse and goat, I learned. The horse had begun to pine, and the goat was glad to get back home and abandon the cat food. Funny, really, that the goat's appearance had nothing whatever to do with astrology or Capricorn.

Go figure. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This story is dedicated to Ellin Sarot, who bravely provided me with some astrological information. She deserves my gratitude, but no responsibility whatever for the odd use and misuse I have made of her gift.

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BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

Hank's Tale
BY DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

Whatever It Takes
BY BENJAMIN M. SCHUTZ

The Big Shuffle
BY CLARK HOWARD

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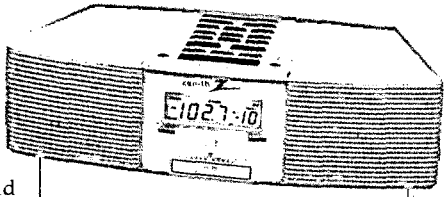

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